Essays in Congressional Communication

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Abstract

Members of Congress must manage both their representative and legislative responsibilities. As congressional districts have grown in population, how have these offices handled the increase in communications volume that has accompanied the twin challenges of population growth and communications access? As communications have gotten less costly, has this changed the population of those making contact with their elected officials? What effect does this communication have on how constituents approve of their member of Congress? And finally, how do members of Congress use the resources allocated to them to communicate with their constituents?

Essay 1 examines this issue from the point of view of the constituent. Using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies 2006-2008, it examines patterns of contact, including reasons for and means of contact. Reported contact with members of Congress has increased, mirroring data from Congress about their increased communications volume. The majority of this communication is oriented towards expressing positions on issues, and most of that communication is conducted via e-mail. Finally, while most constituents who make contact are satisfied with the results of that contact, the proportion of those dissatisfied has increased.

Essay 2 examines how that communication translates into member job approval.

While members of Congress generally do not suffer from the low approval ratings that their institution has, experiences contacting Congress can affect approval. Those who contact their member of Congress are somewhat more likely to approve of their member of Congress. However, that effect varies with the constituent's level of satisfaction with the contact, and this effect can outweigh partisanship in driving the probability of member job approval.

Essay 3 examines how members of Congress use the franking privilege to communicate with their districts. While use of this tool has declined over time, evidence shows that members may use this tool in an anticipatory rather than reactionary fashion, and that a significant subset of members of Congress do not use the mass mailing benefit to communicate with their districts. District and member demographics also have some relationship to the use of this benefit.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Congress and Communication

When virtually any issue of national import arrives in the public imagination, the first instinct of any group with a large grassroots constituency is to implore their members to contact their member of Congress—flood the phone lines, send e-mails, write letters, appear in person at district offices, tweet, post to Facebook, and corner the member of Congress at appearances and town hall meetings. This relationship, in many ways, is baked into the structure of the Congress. The Founders sought to have a lower house with shorter terms in order to foster closer relationships between representatives and constituents.

Granted, the Founders were dealing with a context where members of Congress faced arduous journeys to get back and forth between Washington and their districts, rather than an era of easily accessible air travel, train service, electronic communications, and staff budgets. Additionally, each member represented only approximately

30,000 constituents at the beginning of the Republic—a far more manageable number than today's average of more than 700,000. In such a context, members must rely more on the resources made available to them by the institution, such as websites, a professional staff, district and Washington offices, telephones, and party resources for developing messages. At the same time, these resources could create distance between members of Congress and their constituents. How has an institution designed to be accountable to the people adjusted to the onslaught of communications brought about by the telecommunications revolution? What does the modern communications environment look like for members of Congress and their constituents?

Members of Congress, at the very least, wish to *appear* interested in the opinions of their constituents. At the end of the day—regardless of who they raise money from, their role in the party, or their number of appearances of *Meet the Press*—they must ultimately be re-elected by their constituents. And while members represent 700,000 or so constituents, they are likely responsive to a much smaller number. Not every individual in that 700,000 is eligible to vote, and of those eligible a significant portion do not turn out in every election. As Fenno argues, members of Congress have concentric constituencies that determine the likelihood that members will be attentive and responsive to the concerns of that group. In essence, the advent of these technologies could make it easier for members to identify and respond to those constituents in the re-election and primary constituencies. These technologies could also make it easier for members to understand the underlying concerns of those in the geographic constituency (Fenno, 1978).

This explosion of communication also has a dark side. Members live much more

in public now than at any previous point in history and also tend to spend more time in their districts, given the increased demands placed on them by their constituencies. Congress has long been an unpopular institution; as of February 2013, overall approval of Congress hovered around the 15% mark, bottoming out at 10% in 2012 (Newport, 2013). However, the evidence remains that dissatisfaction with Congress does not necessarily translate into wholesale change in the institution. Well over 90% of members of Congress who seek re-election are returned to office, election after election.

This project aims to examine this relationship in the modern context, its consequences for congressional approval, and how members of Congress use the resources available to them to facilitate this communication and present themselves to their constituents while leveraging new sources of information. This study leverages new data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, as well as a dataset compiling mass mailing data and congressional demographics, to present a case for how members of Congress and their constituents interact today, as well as the consequences for that communication on member approval ratings.

1.2 Who Contacts Congress?

The first essay, "Who Contacts Congress?" presents a straightforward examination of the data from the 2006, 2007, and 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies. Before moving on to any significant analysis, it is essential to establish the basic results from the data; in essence, who contacts, why they contact, and how they

contact their members of Congress. While the American National Election Study included a question about whether or not respondents had contacted their member of Congress in several studies until 1990, these questions clearly do not get at questions of contact in the modern context, given the new forms of communication available to citizens. Additionally, these questions were far more limited in their level of detail, as well as limited in terms of the number of respondents. This study helps ameliorate these issues, as it brings to bear more recent data on the question, as well as more detailed questions about the reasons behind contact for constituents, what means they use to make contact with their member of Congress, and their level of satisfaction with that contact. Additionally, the larger sample size in these studies makes it easier to analyze these sub-questions in more detail.

A key finding is that contact with members of Congress is more widespread now than in the time periods covered by previous studies. This lines up with what congressional staffers have indicated; namely, contact from the public to Congress has been on the increase for the last two decades as it has become easier and less costly to make contact with public officials via electronic means. Additionally, the vast majority of reported contact came via e-mail, which has been a blessing and a curse for members of Congress. E-mails, if handled correctly, can be much more efficient for staff to handle. However, the sheer volume of e-mail can be overwhelming for even the most efficient congressional staff.

As far as where contact comes from, the findings bear out many previous theories about who contacts public officials: namely, that contact tends to come from those who are older (particularly senior citizens) and those who are more educated.

In addition to demographic factors, the study also examined contact in the context of political factors, such as partisanship and ideological extremity. In the case of these years, those who self-identified as Republicans or Independents were somewhat more likely to contact their member of Congress than those who self-identified as Democrats. Additionally, those who identified as very liberal or conservative were far more likely to contact their member of Congress, which fits with what we know about those who claim more extreme ideological identities. This also lines up with the reasons that respondents tended to give for contacting their member of Congress, which was most often to express a position on an issue, rather than to request particularistic benefits or arrange a visit to Washington, D.C. This is something of a departure from the orthodox depiction of the constituent-representative relationship as presented in standard introductory American government textbooks; in many cases, the focus is on constituents seeking particularized benefits, such as assistance with a passport or a Social Security problem. This result indicates that the vast majority of contact is focused on communicating policy preferences to representatives.

The fact that most communication with Congress is focused on the policy arena can make it difficult for constituents to have a satisfactory encounter with their representative. The final component of the first essay explores whether or not constituents come away from their communications with their representatives satisfied. If a constituent is expressing an opinion on an issue, the member may or may not have fully developed a position on said issue and cascaded that position to constituent-facing staff. Not every member is fully briefed and informed on every bill or every issue that comes across the wire, making it more difficult for constituents to receive a satisfac-

tory response to a position statement. Additionally, some constituents may consider themselves satisfied with the contact only if they come away from the contact knowing that their representative agrees with them on said issue. This can be contrasted with constituents seeking particularized benefits or arranging trips to Washington, DC. In many cases, those concerns can be resolved relatively quickly and concretely. Overall, most people are satisfied with the contact that they have with their member of Congress, though that level of satisfaction has declined in recent years, indicating that the increased volume of communication may not be well-received on Capitol Hill.

1.3 Communication with Congress and Member Job Approval

The second essay, "Communication with Congress and Member Job Approval," examines the consequences of these communications on constituent perceptions of member job performance. Members of Congress, being "single-minded seekers of re-election" (Mayhew, 1974), are always on the hunt for new ways to bolster their standing with those they represent in hopes of maximizing the certainty that they will continue to hold office. Given that members' activities in terms of fostering constituent communications are one of the most direct ways they demonstrate their utility as representatives to their constituents, it makes sense to look at the impact that these communications can have on member job approval ratings.

Given that satisfaction with congressional communication is far from universal, it would make sense to investigate whether that lack of satisfaction has consequences

for job approval ratings. As noted earlier, members of Congress are dealing with huge increases in communications volume and a simultaneous flattening and decline in their office allowances and resources in terms of research and staff. In many ways, for those who contact Congress, their satisfaction with that contact could serve as a proxy for the effectiveness of a member's staff operations. When constituents contact their member of Congress, in all reality that contact is generally going through a staff member, rather than directly to the member.

Additionally, those who contact Congress generally fit the profile of those who would be most politically active and engaged—exactly the people a member of Congress seeks to curry favor with at election time. While members of Congress generally benefit from high approval ratings that Congress as an institution does not enjoy, the source of this approval is complex. It is generally dominated by partisanship, unsurprisingly: Those who share partisanship with their member of Congress are far more likely to approve of their member of Congress than those who do not share partisanship. One of the key findings in this essay is the interplay between member job approval, partisanship, and contact satisfaction. Based on findings from this project, a constituent not of her member's party who has a satisfactory contact with her member of Congress is more likely to approve of her member's job approval than a co-partisan who has an unsatisfactory contact. This is indicative of the power that individualized communications can have when constituents make these determinations about their perceptions of their member of Congress. Additionally, in districts that are closely divided, members may wish to emphasize high-quality constituent interactions and focus on their staff effectiveness in order to maximize the probability

that non-co-partisans will approve of the member's job performance.

The effect of poor contact on the probability of co-partisan approval drives home the point that member contacts with constituents are not the unmitigated good they once were. Members of Congress once operated under the assumption that to be known is to be liked. However, given the increased opportunities for contact, each interaction is now as much an opportunity to fail as to succeed. Additionally, the low overall approval for Congress may now bleed into perceptions of individual members' job approval. It may be that with constituents coming from an initially negative perception of members of Congress makes it more difficult for representatives to get buy-in from their constituents. The type of contact may also play a role here; as indicated before, most people are contacting their member of Congress to express a position, which could make it difficult for a member to respond in a manner that satisfies the constituent. If the vast majority of contacts are those to which a member can't respond easily, it stands to reason that these contacts might not work in a positive fashion for members of Congress.

1.4 Using the Franking Privilege: An Exploration

While the first two components of this project emphasize the relationship between members of Congress and their constituents as directed by the constituents, members of Congress also have resources with which to present themselves to their constituents. One of the most useful measures available is that of the Statement of Disbursements of the House, which is published quarterly by the Clerk of the House of Representa-

tives. This includes a report of every piece of mail sent as a mass mailing by each member of Congress. These are defined as mailings of 500 or more substantially similar pieces of mail sent by a member of Congress. These would be the newsletters that come to mind whenever one thinks about the use of the franking privilege. While the member's signature, or frank, does serve as the stamp, members are charged for the postage cost against their Member's Representational Allowance. These newsletters, while highly regulated by the Franking Commission as far as content and design, do provide an important mechanism for members to define themselves to their constituency (Lipinski, 2004).

Usage of this resource is highly variable among members of Congress, for any number of reasons. The franking privilege is zero-sum; a dollar spent on sending mail to the district cannot be spent on travel, staff salaries, or rent for district offices. As such, given the challenges in targeting constituents using the postal system, members may opt not to make use of this asset. In addition, the advent of electronic tools such as websites, e-mail newsletters, Twitter, and Facebook allow members to not only communicate directly with their constituencies but also respond much more quickly to the events of the day. A newsletter may require several weeks' or months' lead time to be compiled, formatted, and mailed; electronic newsletters could require a matter of hours, and Facebook and Twitter are designed for virtually instantaneous communication.

However, members of Congress do leverage this tool for their purposes with some revealing patterns. Members elected to office with smaller margins in 2006 sent significantly more mailings to their districts, as one might expect. Vote share is the most

powerful explanatory variable when predicting mailing behavior in the year immediately after the election; the explanatory power of this variable decreases in election years, likely in response to anticipated electoral challenges. In 2008, district characteristics were far more predictive of mailing behavior in a multivariate regression.

An interesting finding is the presence of "zero mailers" who opted out of using this resource entirely. These zero mailers tended to be white, male, and from urban districts, and the 2007 cohort generally enjoyed significant margins of victory in their 2006 contests. There were, interestingly, more zero mailers in 2008 than in 2007, contradicting what might be expected in the case of an election year. This is likely reflective of more awareness of electoral dynamics in the district, or a preference to avoid the hassle of sending mass mailings with the more burdensome regulations imposed by the Committee on House Administration in election years.

1.5 Conclusion

The shifting communications landscape presents challenges and opportunities for researchers. New data that dig deeper into the perceptions constituents have of their representatives make it more reasonable to draw conclusions about how that relationship functions. Additionally, moving data previously available only in hard copy into a more easily analyzable format gives valuable insight into how members of Congress approach the most directly representational aspects of their position. This project takes advantage of these new resources and integrates them into a broader dialogue about how members of Congress and those they represent navigate the unfamiliar

waters of the constituent-representative relationship.

Chapter 2

Who Contacts Congress?

2.1 Introduction

Members of the House of Representatives hold a unique position in the structure of the federal government. They represent distinct geographic districts but are officers of the federal government. The House was designed by the Framers to serve as the representative of the people in the new government, tied closely to the needs of the people and subject to frequent elections. As Madison argued in *Federalist 57*, the nature of frequent elections is to force members of Congress to serve their constituents faithfully and to be responsive to their needs (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 2005). In order to be responsive to one's constituents, a member of Congress must be in contact with his or her constituents and respond to them as necessary. This dialogue forms the relationship between member and district between election days and helps shape the form of political engagement in the United States.

What does this dialogue between members of Congress and their constituents

look like? In particular, how do citizens use the communication tools available to them to inform their members of Congress of their opinions on the issues of the day? Answering these questions will help us understand the *process* of representation, in addition to the inputs and outcomes—i.e., who votes and who gets elected. There are twenty-four months between general elections; the discussion between member and constituent continues by necessity beyond the results announced on election night.

At its most basic level, the representative-constituent relationship functions much as the Federalists envisioned it: Constituents elect members of Congress; members of Congress go to Washington and make policy; members then return to the district to stand for re-election. If the constituents like the policies the member supported, the member will be returned to office. If not, the constituents will vote out the member of Congress. But what happens between election days? Communication between member and constituent does not end at the ballot box. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people contact their members of Congress, and these contacts help inform the behavior and preferences of members of Congress. The results of these contacts also inform constituents' evaluations of members of Congress. What types of constituents contact the member of Congress to express an opinion or ask for help?

This analysis tackles the issue from the constituent's point of view. There are four key questions to be examined: who contacts their representative, for what reasons, using what methods, and their satisfaction with that contact. This analysis utilizes data from the MIT subset of the the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, the 2007 and 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies Common Content, and the 2008 CCES Panel Survey, all of which include data on contact with members of

Congress. It will highlight not only demographic patterns of contact with members of Congress, but the frequency of use of various methods of contact, including traditional means and electronic or online tools.

The evolution of communication technology in the last twenty-five years, from e-mail to cell phones and text messaging, as well as social media tools, calls for a re-examination of how members of Congress stay connected with their districts. This topic has also been on the mind of policymakers as of late. Contrary to traditional beliefs about the lack of political participation by the American electorate, many members of Congress find themselves overwhelmed by information from constituents. As staff budgets have not expanded markedly in the last two decades, the Congress is in many ways suffering from information overload (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). The growth of these technologies has been the subject of much frustration on Capitol Hill, with constituent e-mails forcing multiple shutdowns of the House e-mail servers (Yehle, 2008). While some research shows that electronic communication has not measurably lowered the barriers to communication that citizens encounter, other research has shown that electronic communication is the preferred format for those new to political participation (Best and Kreuger, 2005; Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). However, research from congressional offices shows that members of Congress place a high priority on responding effectively to communications from constituents (Fitch, Goldschmidt and Cooper, 2011).

While many would hail this development as a positive one, congressional staffers indicate that this has made listening to and understanding their constituents much more difficult, as there are few standard mechanisms in place to facilitate the use of

electronic communication between members of Congress and their districts. Given security concerns that have arisen in Congress after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the anthrax mailings shortly thereafter, many congressional offices encouraged constituents to avoid using postal mail to communicate with Washington offices due to delays in receiving mail, instead encouraging alternative communications, especially through e-mail (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005).

As congressional staff and members of Congress are confronted with these changes, the ways that they allocate their time and energy have reason to change in order to keep up with the needs of their district, with possible repercussions on constituent satisfaction with their contact with their member of Congress. In recent years, debates over health care and other major policy decisions have also brought out a new wave of activists, but have made some members of Congress less enthusiastic at the prospect of interacting with their constituents, given the amount of vitriol involved in face-to-face engagement with citizens in some situations (Stolberg, 2009).

Likewise, much of this participation may not have the results that constituents are looking for. Many citizens will participate in large-scale e-mail or postcard campaigns facilitated by interest groups in the hopes that their position can influence the behavior or policies pursued by their representatives. These types of facilitated communications obviously lower the barrier to communications for many constituents, as the work of identifying one's representative, figuring out a means to engage in contact, and writing the content of that contact has already been performed by the interest group. However, approximately half of the Congressional staffers interviewed by the Congressional Management Foundation indicate that they do not believe the

veracity of form e-mails. Staffers believe that the electronic mail organized by interest groups is sent without the knowledge or consent of the constituent. Additionally, given the minimal effort required to forward or copy and paste a form e-mail, congressional staff and members of Congress may discount such communications when triaging constituent interactions, as such a level of effort does not obviously correlate with intensive attention to an issue. Overall, it appears that the effect of these communications is to increase the volume of communication with Congress, increase the number of unique citizens contacting their members of Congress, and increase the workload in individual offices, with an accompanying decline in the overall quality of communications (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005).

Little is known about these citizens who contact their members of Congress. Prior research indicates that those who contact politicians at all levels are more likely to be white, older, and better educated (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), indicating the possibility of a skewed sense of what the public wants getting presented to those in power. It is not yet known if online political activity serves to level the playing field or simply exacerbates the inequalities already in place. Recent research indicates that approximately 44% of those who engage in online political activity are relatively new to political participation, which may be a positive indicator for a more representative set of voices (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). However, electronic communications and political participation, to date, appear to make it easier for those who are already likely to communicate to do so.

There are certainly digital divides with regard to access to the Internet; however, public access to these resources is growing at an astronomical rate. Recent

statistics indicate that 74% of American adults are at least occasional users of the internet, though access does show a skew towards the younger and the more affluent (Pew Center for Internet and American Life, 2008). Recent research indicates that while the motivations for political participation on the Internet are different than those for traditional forms of participation, participation still skews toward those of higher socioeconomic status (Best and Kreuger, 2005). It is theoretically possible that ease of communication has lowered the cost of political engagement, leading to more widespread and equitable political activity. However, it is just as likely, and perhaps even more so, that these new forms of communication are another tool in the arsenal of already-engaged citizens. Recent survey research indicates that those who contact their members of Congress are more likely to be involved in their community in other ways (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005).

As noted earlier, this analysis aims to answer four questions. First, who are the people who contact Congress? Those who choose to have contact with their member of Congress may follow the traditional patterns of political participation, and are older, better educated, and wealthier, or they may be more representative of the population as a whole. Second, what means do they use to contact their member of Congress? Anecdotal evidence from congressional offices indicates that there has been an uptick in the proportion of communications coming through member websites, with a decline in receipt of letters and phone calls. As mentioned above, in some ways this reflects the preferences of congressional offices in terms of their ability to respond to constituent communications in a timely manner. It remains to be seen, however, whether this holds true over a larger population. Third, why do people choose to

contact their members of Congress? Members of Congress cannot do much on their own about large-scale policy initiatives and are often beholden to party discipline when casting votes on controversial bills, but they can certainly help with arranging tours of the White House and tracking down lost Social Security checks. Do citizens call to express opinions or to seek particularized benefits? Finally, do these contacts have satisfactory results for the constituents—are they ultimately happy with their contact?

Likewise, it is also important to understand how constituents remember these interactions, as that is what people carry with them into the voting booth. After all, if there is minimal marginal effect, why should members of Congress devote their limited time and resources to behaviors without a payoff? The survey includes questions about how constituents perceive the interactions that they have with members of Congress, including their satisfaction with the results of the contact.

2.2 Prior Research

As contact with Congress has skyrocketed, the available research on this subject suffers from a lag and has generally been concentrated in the policymaking arena, rather than academic studies.

The relationship between members of Congress and their constituents can be a fickle one. With the average Congressional district population topping 650,000 people, it can be difficult to foster close relationships with one's constituents. Likewise, constituents may not always be fully informed or cognizant of the nature of the mem-

ber of Congress' job, or the limitations on his or her staff. In some cases, members of Congress or their staffs are barred from intervention, or the constituent may not understand the difference between a federal and state matter. They may not be informed as to lead times for assistance with certain issues, or they may have unrealistic expectations as to the speed with which caseworkers are able to act or the vagaries of the legislative process. Members of Congress are not all-powerful, nor are they entirely independent in the choices they make when casting votes or dealing with the writing and development of legislation. Nevertheless, an integral part of a functioning democracy, for better or for worse, may be open lines of communication between representatives and the represented.

These open lines of communication serve purposes beyond fostering goodwill toward the demands of a democratic republic. Strong communications operations can also have significant electoral benefits for members of Congress. Given the wisdom that members of Congress exist as "single minded seekers of re-election" (Mayhew, 1974), any activity that increases the probability of re-election is worthwhile, and so making sure that these lines of communication are open and well-oiled can certainly bring benefits on Election Day. Long-standing wisdom in political science indicated that, in general, to be known by one's constituents was to be liked, and that contact with constituents would nearly always lead to a positive impression. Offering high-quality constituent services and access was key to the development of a "personal vote," allowing the member some leeway in voting in Washington (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Bianco, 1994). Members of Congress develop a "home style" that allows them to present themselves to their constituents in the district, emphasizing

certain aspects of their personality, experience, or preferences in Washington in order to relate to one's constituents (Fenno, 1978). However, other research has found that the role of constituency service in securing electoral success is disputable at best (Johannes and McAdams, 1981; McAdams and Johannes, 1988). However, regardless of what the political science literature may demonstrate, members of Congress are unlikely to shut down their mail operations and their district offices or fire their casework staff. As members of Congress place value on responding to constituents, research about members of Congress ought to do the same.

Members of Congress are confronted with a wide variety of communications, and overworked and potentially overwhelmed staff must manage their perceptions of the communications they receive, along with the expectations of their constituents. From the point of view of a staff member, forwarding an e-mail organized by an interest group is very different from long-term contact in order to negotiate the federal bureaucracy or receive personalized services, and data have not often been able to get at some of these differences. The data used in this study, particularly the 2008 CCES panel data, include questions adding more detail to how we understand the reasons and means for communicating with Congress. Prior research has generally covered only policy-oriented contact, while many citizens do initiate contact with their member of Congress for reasons other than expressing a policy preference. As far as hypotheses, I expect that use of electronic communications will be more frequent in younger age groups and that traditional gender, age, and education differences in contacting will still be present, but the overall likelihood of contact with Congress will be somewhat higher across the board demographically.

Descriptive characteristics of the members of Congress, such as their race and gender, can also have an effect. The role of descriptive representation is still not fully understood in the political science literature, but it can certainly provide some benefits to a member of Congress. Racial congruence can drive some contact and approval of members of Congress, though its effect is limited outside the direct relationship between representative and constituent (Gay, 2002). Gender congruence can also have an effect, though it is less than partisanship or race (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003; Lawless, 2004), but it is certainly an element of one's identity that is not perfectly correlated with any particular policy profile. Making sure that one's constituents can identify and relate to these elements of a member's profile can certainly help a member of Congress hold on to his or her seat, though given the diversity in many districts, it can rarely secure a majority.

This mechanism of communication is essential for facilitating the ideals of representation that best fit conventional wisdom. Representatives are generally tasked with representing the substance of their constituents' preferences—voting in accordance with what they want, with sanctions for doing otherwise. Indeed, prior research has found a relatively strong relationship between district preferences and member voting behavior, though little is known about how well citizens comprehend their own policy preferences or the voting records of their representatives (Converse, 1964; Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan, 2002; Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson, 1995; Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010). However, as the number of citizens per representative increases with the population of the United States and districts inevitably become more heterogeneous, it is important to parse out how members of Congress solicit

and receive the views and needs of their constituents, and how constituents leverage advances in communications technology to make their views known to their representatives. By the same token, members of Congress also have a more difficult job in communicating the meaning of their actions back to their constituents, in hopes of maintaining electoral safety.

The presumption has generally been that the act of contacting a member of Congress is the crucial part of the information flow. However, the process does not end there. The constituent's recall of the interaction is also essential. Conventional wisdom has generally held that each contact is a win-win situation for the member of Congress. It's an opportunity to get credit, advertise, and have the attention of a constituent outside the context of potentially negative electioneering rhetoric. In many cases, it is also an opportunity to give particularized attention to constituents, rather than simply hoping that they will see campaign advertising or remember information from a congressional newsletter, and to create a positive impression. But it may be possible that contact actually opens up an opportunity for members of Congress to fall short. Given that many contacts with members of Congress may be due to constituents' disagreement with their representatives, it can be difficult to bring those constituents around. Additionally, while members of Congress often have strong links with the bureaucracy in order to facilitate the experiences of their constituents, the bureaucracy does not always act as quickly or effectively as a member of Congress might like, leading to disappointment on the part of the constituent. In today's communications environment, accessibility is taken as a matter of course. Members of Congress are available not only through phone, e-mail, and postal mail,

but through other services such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. While this can be a potential boon to share positive events with constituents, it can also serve to extend the life of a gaffe or spread it to a wider audience. Members of Congress have begun to cite their expanded accessibility to constituents as a major factor impeding lawmaking and driving some members away from the job (Allen, 2012).

Indeed, staffers in many congressional offices have cited massive increases in mail volume to their offices as a new challenge. A 2011 report from the Congressional Management Foundation indicated that some offices have experienced a more-than-doubling of constituent mail since 2002, and an attendant shift of communications priorities from traditional mail operations to electronic mail operations. However, this study also noted that members' offices are becoming more effective at managing these communications, deploying electronic responses to speed up response time (Fitch, Goldschmidt and Cooper, 2011). However, congressional staff are ultimately somewhat dubious about the utility and efficacy of these communications from constituents, particularly communications directed by interest groups. Many staff members report that the most efficacious tool for a constituent to sway an undecided member of Congress is actually old-fashioned–in-person visits. Staff also report that e-mails and postal letters can have some influence, but many staff also believe that advocacy campaigns based on form letters are not true representations of constituent opinion (Goldschmidt, 2011).

2.3 Data and Methods

The data for this project come from the MIT subset of the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), the 2007 and 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study Common Content, and the 2008 CCES Panel Study (Ansolabehere, 2006, 2007, 2009*b*,*a*). All of the surveys were administered via a web-based form by YouGov/Polimetrix. The 2006 MIT study has 1,013 respondents; the 2007 Common Content has 10,000 respondents, and the 2008 Common Content has 32,800 respondents. The 2008 Panel study has 2,000 respondents who were also interviewed in 2006 and 2007, though the questions relevant to this study were asked only on the 2008 wave of the panel. The format of the survey provides opportunities for innovation in survey research, particularly in the ease of allowing for multiple responses and administering branched questions.

The surveys were undertaken by Polimetrix (later YouGov/Polimetrix) of Palo Alto, CA. This sample leverages a sample matching methodology combining an opt-in internet survey panel with a consumer file covering more than 95% of American adults. This matched sample is designed to closely resemble a target random sample and has exceeded some RDD surveys in predicting election results and turnout (Vavreck and Rivers, 2008).

The battery of questions about contact with House members on the all of the surveys started with a basic question about whether the respondents had contacted their member of Congress for any reason. If the respondent indicated yes, he was presented with a question about how satisfied he was with that contact. The study also included questions on whether the respondent could remember any projects brought

back to the district by the member. On the 2008 panel study, the respondent was presented with the same question about contact with his member of Congress as on the Common Content, and if the respondent answered yes, the respondent was then presented with a series of questions about their reason for contacting member of Congress (to express a position on an issue, for help with a problem, or to arrange a visit to Washington, DC), his means of contact with his member of Congress (e-mail, phone, postal mail, fax, in-person, or other), and his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the contact. This allows for much broader examinations of constituent contact with Congress because the questions probe into methods of contact, reasons behind the contact, and the constituent's ultimate satisfaction with contact, and the larger sample sizes allow for easier analysis of the results.

Examining both the act of contacting and the resulting level of satisfaction allows for a more in-depth analysis of the data and to see whether contact with an unsatisfactory outcome has a negative impact on the probability of member approval, and whether its magnitude matches that of a positive contact. The survey also included traditional batteries of attitudinal questions about policy positions and economic perceptions, and demographic characteristics including self-reports of level of interest in politics and public affairs, and self-reported strength of ideology. The incumbent was identified by name to prime the traditional 5-point job approval question, with the respondent asked what party the candidate is a member of after answering that question. The models also include an indicator variable for whether the seat was contested or not.

2.4 Who Contacts?

Contact with any government official by a citizen has traditionally been considered a somewhat rare political activity, and contact with Congress is no different. Particularly in the past and prior to widespread internet-based communications, it has required knowledge of who one's member of Congress is, identifying an appropriate means by which to contact one's member of Congress (in-person, phone, postal mail), the time and energy to write a letter or make a phone call, and often an investment in the outcome of an issue or a particular need for assistance, as well as the knowledge that a member of Congress can be useful in such a context. Particularly prior to the advent of member websites that can centralize useful information, citizens may not have been aware that their members of Congress had resources that they can take advantage of, such as caseworkers to help them navigate the federal bureaucracy. Table 2.1 presents data from the American National Election Studies about the frequency of contact with members of Congress in all the years that the question was asked by the ANES (Michigan, 2002). The rates of contact with Congress hovered around the 15% mark in each year the question was asked. All of these years were, of course, prior to the widespread use and availability of electronic communications via the internet and e-mail, meaning that each of the respondents had contact through postal mail, telephone, or in person.

These rates reflect the larger investment of time and energy required to contact one's member of Congress prior to the telecommunications revolution. As noted above, prior to member websites and the "Write your Rep" system, contacting one's

R Ever Contact Congressman	Year of Study				
	1978	1980	1986	1990	Total
Yes	15.3	14.1	15.3	14.7	14.9
No	84.7	85.9	84.7	85.3	85.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2.1: Reported Contact, American National Election Studies

member of Congress was a multi-step process: identifying who one's member of Congress was, locating the appropriate address or phone number, which may have taken a phone book or a trip to the library, writing a letter or making a phone call, or appearing in-person at a member's office, and waiting for a response if necessary. Additionally, many people are not well-informed about what a member of Congress' office is able to help with. Now, a simple Google search can bring up a member's webpage that solicits constituent communication, identifies the member's positions on some issues, lays out processes for certain interactions with Congress (e.g., requesting a flag flown over the Capitol), and lists what members are able to help with, such as seeking federal grants or tracking down veterans' benefits. This increase in communication reflected from the NES data moving to the CCES data also reflects information about the increased volume of electronic communication reported by groups such as the Congressional Management Foundation (Fitch, Goldschmidt and Cooper, 2011; Goldschmidt, 2011).

Moving on to more recent data, Table 2.2 presents data from the 2006 MIT CCES sample and the 2007 and 2008 CCES Common Content on overall rates of contact with members of Congress for various demographic groups. Overall, less than half of the sample engaged in contact with their member of Congress, though these rates

are higher than those seen in the ANES studies cited above. In all likelihood, this reflects the modern ease of contact with members of Congress, as well as, paradoxically, increased solicitation of contact by members of Congress through means such as robo-calls and electronic newsletters. Many congressional staff report that they believe the growth of technology has increased the ease with which constituents contact their offices and participate in the policy process (Goldschmidt, 2011). Notably, the 2008 data reflects a lower rate of contact (though still higher than the data from the ANES). This could represent the larger sample size, indicating that the sample is somewhat less engaged than the samples from 2006 and 2007. Additionally, there is somewhat less solicitation of contact at certain points of election years because of the restrictions placed on the franking privilege, in both traditional postal mail and electronic communications.

In many ways, the patterns reflect the demographic patterns one would expect when making any examination of political contact with government. Middle-aged and older respondents are more likely to get in touch with their member of Congress. In terms of gender, larger proportion of men report contact with their member of Congress, by approximately ten percentage points. There are also racial disparities in contact with members of Congress. White respondents show a much higher proportion reporting contact, with African American respondents less likely to report contact. Hispanic respondents are somewhat more likely to indicate contact with their member of Congress than African American respondents, and white respondents are also more likely to have contact with their member of Congress.

Group	2006	2007	2008
Overall	**39.92**	**42.20**	**28.47**
Age			
18-24	35.39	26.03	15.23
25-34	26.76	31.82	14.99
35-44	41.68	35.57	27.34
45-54	45.06	44.68	32.50
55-64	50.97	53.19	37.10
65-74	57.70	56.63	41.52
75+	23.53	49.30	40.97
Gender			
Men	32.88	49.77	32.88
Women	24.78	35.57	24.78
Race			
White	43.21	44.17	32.06
Black	18.67	27.39	15.50
Hispanic	37.12	38.15	18.51
Asian	24.82	23.40	15.85
N	1013	9933	32307

Table 2.2: Frequency of Reported Member Contacts by Age Group, Gender and Race

Political factors can also play a role in shaping the profile of the people contacting their member of Congress. Partisanship, ideological positioning, interest and engagement with politics, and perceived partisan congruence are all potential, and highly likely, explanatory factors for determining who contacts their member of Congress.

Party	2006	2007	2008
Republican	40.71	45.08	35.89
Democrat	39.99	41.51	27.23
Independent	43.37	47.15	21.37

Table 2.3: Frequency of Reported Member Contacts by Party

Table 2.3 presents the frequency with which reported partisans, including lead-

ers, report contacting their member of Congress. In 2006 and 2007, self-reported Independents were most likely to report contacting their member of Congress, while Republicans and Democrats were somewhat less likely to do so. This trend shifted in 2008, with self-identified partisans contacting their members of Congress more frequently than independents. However, the overall rates of contact for the sample dropped somewhat in 2008 across the board, perhaps reflecting a broader cross-section of respondents and presenting a somewhat more realistic portrait of the profile of the population making contact with their member of Congress.

Ideological Extremity	2006	2007	2008
Moderate	40.67	39.43	25.88
Liberal or Conservative	42.19	39.43	32.56
Very Liberal or Conservative	53.89	57.36	40.91
No Response	15.42	14.05	8.47
N	1,013	10,000	32,800

Table 2.4: Frequency of Reported Member Contacts by Ideological Extremity

Table 2.4 presents the frequency of contact with members of Congress broken out by self-reported ideological extremity. This variable was created by collapsing the self-reported ideological scale into a three-point scale of moderate, liberal or conservative, or very liberal conservative, rather than a left-right spectrum. This captures a broader picture of the effect of ideological intensity, rather than ideological content, in terms of driving contact with elected officials. People who self-identify as very liberal or very conservative are more likely to contact their member of Congress, with self-identified moderates somewhat less likely to make contact with their member of

Congress. Interestingly, those reporting no ideology at all were much less likely to report contact with their member of Congress; this may well reflect a broader lack of interest in politics. Those reporting themselves as some sort of ideologue are more likely to pay attention to politics and have clear opinions on issues facing legislators. As such, it is reasonable that they would find more reason to contact their members of Congress, as they may have more areas of agreement or disagreement to communicate to their representatives. Individuals reporting these clear political preferences are also more likely to turn out to vote, indicating that members of Congress may wish to cater to these individuals, given the potential for reward or punishment at the ballot box.

Party Congruence	2006	2007	2008
Same Party	45.21	49.02	42.78
Different Party	36.92	38.61	21.04
N	1,013	10,000	32,800

Table 2.5: Frequency of Reported Member Contacts by Partisan Congruence

Table 2.5 presents the rates of contact with members of Congress based on perceived party congruence. This is based on the respondent's self-reported party identification, including leaners, and their response to a question asking them for the party identification of their member of Congress. If the perceived party is the same as the respondent, the variable is coded 1; otherwise it is coded 0. This captures some elements of both political awareness and partisan perception. The data show that co-partisans are somewhat more likely to contact their members of Congress.

This could be because having a representative of your own party in office could drive partisan engagement, leading to more opportunities for contact. This would give it a somewhat similar effect to racial congruence (Gay, 2002), though partisanship is less a case of symbolic or descriptive representation. A similar but opposite effect could also be present, with non-co-partisans feeling alienated from the political process and therefore less likely to engage with their representatives in Congress.

This could have significant implications for members' expected communications based on their district composition. If a member represents a district that is quite safe, she could expect more communications, given she might have a more engaged electorate. However, some of the data that will be presented later on franking indicate that members of Congress who represent districts with majority partisan identifiers different from their own, or districts that are closely divided, do engage somewhat more with their constituencies through the franking privilege. The effects of this communication on constituent responses are somewhat unclear, but it does appear that from the constituents' point of view, they may feel that they have a more favorable reception from their members of Congress if their member of Congress shares their partisan preferences.

Tables 2.6 and 2.7 present the analysis of the 2007 CCES Panel Study Common Content. For the most part, the results reflect the expected direction and intensity of the effects of various potential influences on the probability of contacting one's member of Congress. Overall, creating a baseline of a white male between the ages of 45-54 who is a Republican and of the same race and party of his member of Congress generates an overall predicted probability of contact of .398. This would

	β	SE	z	P> |z|
Political Interest	1.080	.042	0.000	
Ideological Extremity	.187	.035	0.000	
Party ID	.151	.038	0.000	
Representative's Party	-.210	.025	0.000	
Party Congruence	-.054	.054	0.312	
Gender	-.010	.050	0.828	
Racial Congruence	.333	.059	0.000	
Race (white/nonwhite)	.083	.066	0.210	
Age group	.169	.017	0.000	
Education	.126	.017	0.000	
Constant	-4.00	.171	0.000	
N	8663			
Pseudo R^2	0.1425			
Log-likelihood	-5111.3793			

Table 2.6: Logit Estimates of Contact with Member of Congress, 2007 Common Content

	Δ	SE	Lower 95%CI	Upper 95% CI
Overall probability of contact	.398	.022	.357	.444
HS Diploma→ 4-Year Degree	.091	.012	.067	.116
Age 25-34→45-54	.077	.008	.062	.092
Different→ Same Party	-.013	.013	-.039	.015
Different →Same Race	.081	.014	.053	.108
Low → High interest	.476	.016	,445	.506
Moderate→Strong Ideology	.092	.017	.058	.126

Table 2.7: First Differences: Probability of Contact with Member of Congress, 2007 Common Content

reflect general expectations of political contact—generally oriented toward older, more affluent individuals. Political interest, not surprisingly, is the driving force behind much of the results, leading to a difference of .576 when moving an individual's self-reported political interest from low to high. Ideology and education have similar effects, though not nearly as large as political interest.

Factors that are more independent of the individual have negative effects in the case of these data and this baseline individual. Moving an individual from not sharing partisanship to co-partisanship and moving from racial non-congruence to congruence both had slight negative effects on the probability of contact.

However, simply moving off of one simple baseline does not give the full picture. When the variables are reset to reflect a different individual profile, the overall rates of change do vary. For example, in Table 2.8, the baseline is a non-white woman between the ages of 25-34 who is a Democrat represented in Congress by a Republican who identifies as moderate and has some college, and claims moderate attention to and interest in politics. The results are similar but reflect definite distinctions in how different types of individuals might respond to structural changes in their representation.

	Δ	SE	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Overall probability of contact	.320	.018	.285	.357
HS Diploma→ 4-Year Degree	.080	.011	.059	.102
Age 25-34→45-54	.077	.008	.062	.093
Different→ Same Party	-.012	.012	-.035	.014
Different →Same Race	.068	.012	.043	.092
Low → High interest	.443	.017	.410	.475
Moderate→Strong Ideology	.081	.015	.051	.0112

Table 2.8: First Differences: Probability of Contact with Member of Congress, 2007 Common Content

Tables 2.9 and 2.10 present the results of a logit estimator predicting contact with members of Congress for the Common Content sample in 2008. The model controls for the respondent's perceived party congruence (drawn from self-reported party identification, and their representative's party identification), age, race (coded

	β	SE	z	P> |z|
Political Interest	.693	.029	24.29	.000
Ideological Extremity	.200	.020	10.24	.000
Party Identification	.182	.022	8.29	.000
Representative's Party	-.402	.013	-31.26	.000
Party Congruence	-.308	.030	10.30	.000
Gender	.137	.028	4.82	.000
Racial Congruence	.432	.039	11.06	.000
Race (white/nonwhite)	.175	.042	4.22	.000
Age Group	.127	.009	13.77	.000
Education	.147	.010	15.29	.000
Constant	-3.826	.105	-36.43	.000
N	29085			
Pseudo R^2	0.1550			
Log-likelihood	-15472.364			

Table 2.9: Logit Estimates of Contact with Member of Congress, 2008 Common Content

	Δ	SE	Lower 95%CI	Upper 95% CI
Overall Probability of Contact	.307	.012	.284	.331
HS Diploma→ 4-Year Degree	.096	.006	.082	.110
Age 25-34→45-54	.051	.004	.043	.058
Different→ Same Party	.069	.007	.056	.084
Different →Same Race	.099	.008	.082	.114
Low → High interest	.288	.010	.268	.308
Moderate→Strong Ideology	.091	.009	.073	.109

Table 2.10: First Differences: Probability of Contact with Member of Congress, 2008 Common Content

as white/nonwhite), gender, racial congruence with their member of Congress, 3-point party identification level of education, self-reported level of interest in and attention to politics, and whether the respondent identifies as a moderate, weak liberal/conservative, or strong liberal/conservative.

Table 2.10 presents first differences generated using CLARIFY (Tomz, Witten-

berg and King, 2003). Overall, creating a baseline of a white male between the ages of 45-54 who is a Republican of the same race and party of his member of Congress generates an overall predicted probability of contact of .307. The usual suspects as far as demographics have the biggest impact on probability of contact with one's member of Congress. Those who are white, middle aged, and better educated are all more likely to contact their members of Congress. The biggest effect comes in the shape of interest in politics. Moving the respondent from a self-report of low interest in politics and public affairs to a high level of interest in politics and public affairs increases the probability of contact with one's member of Congress by .288. Education also has a large effect, with a move from a high school diploma to a 4-year degree leading to a near 10% increase in the probability of their contacting a member of Congress. Age and race also have small but significant effects on the probability of contact, with older respondents and white respondents more likely to contact their members of Congress. Areas of congruence also have small effects. Moving the baseline respondent from a party differential to the same party as their member of Congress produces a change of .069; moving from a different race to the same race as one's member of Congress increases the probability of contact by .099.

A note of caution is important, particularly with the 2008 results. Significance is less useable with this set of data given the very large size of the data set; however, the small size of the standard errors and the positioning of the 95% confidence intervals makes it reasonable to conclude that these effects are real, if not very large.

2.5 How Contact Happens

Group	E-mail	Postal Mail	Fax	Phone	In-Person
Overall	**84.98**	**11.39**	**5.74**	**28.64**	**7.58**
Age					
18-35	82.86	15.02	9.05	24.74	9.00
36-55	86.36	12.86	6.89	28.07	5.16
56-75	85.55	8.46	7.25	30.69	5.31
76 +	73.50	6.19	11.80	33.48	1.36
Gender					
Women	86.73	31.45	5.57	10.72	3.85
Men	83.55	26.34	9.22	11.95	7.29
Race					
White	85.72	29.88	6.45	10.59	5.85
Black	77.27	18.22	3.47	20.46	4.88
Hispanic	81.44	13.92	23.32	12.02	1.42

Table 2.11: Means of Contact by Demographics

Table 2.11 presents data on the means through which people contact their member of Congress.[1]These data are drawn from the CCES Panel Study, which had 2,000 respondents and more detailed questions about the reasons for contact with their members of Congress and the means in which they engaged in such contact. E-mail is the most common means of contact, which is unsurprising given the extraordinary levels of e-mail volume reported by the Congress in recent years (Yager, 2008; Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005; Fitch, Goldschmidt and Cooper, 2011). Many members of Congress, despite the volume it has created, prefer constituents make contact via e-mail rather than postal mail due to the delays associated with postal mail operations on Capitol Hill. Other findings are as expected; older citizens are more likely to use

[1]Cells add up to more than 100%, as respondents were able to choose multiple answers.

postal mail than younger people, with younger groups more dependent on e-mail and telephone calls.

The role of demographics in the use of various forms of communication is an interesting one. Congressional aides indicate that e-mail is less effective than more "old-fashioned" forms of communication, particularly if those e-mails are directed by interest groups (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005; Goldschmidt, 2011). Congressional staff tend to be skeptical of mass e-mails that require very little effort on the part of the constituent, as they may not represent true, deep-seated convictions that could drive electoral results. Because of this skepticism, constituents who use more effective forms of communication (in-person, postal mail, and phone calls) may have more success in presenting and advocating for their agenda. In this case, it appears that the traditionally more privileged groups are more savvy in their use of communications, using more postal mail, in-person contacts, and phone calls to contact their representatives, albeit with some exceptions. A larger proportion of white contactors use phone communication and in-person contacts than black or Hispanic contactors. Larger groups of Black and Hispanic contactors use postal mail to contact their representatives than White contactors. Larger proportions of women use phone calls, while larger proportions of men have in-person contacts with their members of Congress. These proportions indicate that the advantages of more traditional forms of communication may not be restricted to traditionally privileged groups, particularly given that congressional staff report that the most effective tool for persuading an undecided member of Congress is the in-person contact (Goldschmidt, 2011).

2.6 Why Contact Happens

Reason	%
Express Position	91.52
Request Help	5.63
Visit DC	2.85

Table 2.12: Reasons for Contacting Congress

Table 2.12 presents data from the 2008 CCES Panel Study on the reasons that respondents gave for their contact with members of Congress. The vast majority, over 91%, indicated that they contacted their member of Congress in order to express a position on an issue. Less than 6% of respondents contacted their representative to get help navigating the federal bureaucracy, and less than 3% made contact to arrange a visit to Washington, DC. This correlates, in many ways, with other information we have about the type of mail that members of Congress receive. Given the uncertainty that many congressional staff have about the veracity of the e-mails that their offices cope with, it stands to reason that that volume of mail is not coming for reasons of particularized benefit. Rather, it is likely citizens expressing their opinion on issues before the Congress that they care about on some level.

There is some variation in how citizens' methods for contacting Congress interact with their reasons for making contact, which can be seen in Table 2.13.[2] The vast majority of those contacting their members of Congress to express a position

[2]Columns may add up to more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one selection in the survey interface.

	Reason for Contact		
Method	Express Position	Request Help	Visit DC
Phone	6.00	8.31	5.39
E-mail	76.67	29.36	53.89
Postal Mail	7.00	25.41	3.10
Fax	7.80	4.47	0.00
In-Person	2.52	32.45	55.61

Table 2.13: Methods of Contact by Reason for Contact

do so via e-mail. This makes sense, given the overall volume of e-mail to Congress as well as the ease with which interest groups can organize electronically. There is somewhat more variation in how constituents request help from their members of Congress. These respondents were divided most clearly between e-mail, postal mail, and in-person requests. Given the nature of congressional communication, this is also reasonable. Many members of Congress hold office hours or open houses in their districts, with staff members available to handle casework intake, encouraging in-person contact. Given that there are fewer delays with regard to sending postal mail to district offices, which often handle constituent service issues, many respondents may have found that communicating with a member of Congress' district office via postal mail is effective. However, on the whole, many members of Congress do encourage communication via e-mail, particularly given that electronic mail via the congressional mail server can be easily fed into a constituent management software program to track casework efforts. The smallest proportion of those contacting their member of Congress were seeking assistance with arranging a visit to Washington, DC. Notably, the largest groups here are e-mail and in-person, indicating that the same respondents may have used both e-mail and in-person contact—for example,

requesting gallery passes via e-mail and going to the representative's office when visiting Washington.

2.7 Satisfaction with Contact

Constituents may not always have a satisfactory experience when getting in touch with their representatives. Maybe they catch a staff member on a bad day or the request cannot be fulfilled for some reason. Constituents may also have extremely satisfactory experiences with contacting their member of Congress—experiences that can outweigh partisan differences. Members have an opportunity to help their districts and earn their constituents' approval through good constituent services, and some scholars have suggested that these services can be central to a strong electoral position, though this is disputed (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; McAdams and Johannes, 1988).

Table 2.14 presents results from the ANES from 1978 to 1990 and it shows that less than 20% of respondents have voter-initiated contact with their members of Congress, and less than 20% of respondents who had contact with their member of Congress were dissatisfied with that contact.

The data presented in Table 2.15 indicate that this universal acclaim for contact with members of Congress may no longer be the case. In the 2007 and 2008 samples most people who contacted their member of Congress were in fact dissatisfied with that contact. footnote2008a is the Common Content, 2008b is the panel study.While this represents a relatively small proportion of the respondents overall, this informa-

Satisfied Contact	Year of Study				
	1978	1980	1986	1990	Total
Yes	89.3	83.6	89.3	85.7	87.5
No	10.7	16.4	10.7	14.3	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2.14: Reported Satisfaction with Contact, National Election Studies

tion would be concerning for a member of Congress. What does it say when those who contact a member's office are coming away disappointed in the quality of that contact? The rate of satisfaction increases in both 2008 samples, with closer to 70% of those contacting their member of Congress coming away happy with that contact. However, these rates are far more worrying to the member of Congress or observer of Congress than the results from earlier years presented in Table 2.14.

	Year of Study			
	2006	2007	2008a	2008b
Satisfied	48.07	45.88	68.96	64.96
Unsatisfied	51.93	54.12	31.04	35.04
N	482	5789	11297	1022

Table 2.15: Reported Satisfaction with Contact, CCES 2006-2008

The results from the 2008 panel sample provide some useful insight into potential causes of this ultimate dissatisfaction from constituents. Among those giving a reason for making contact with their member of Congress, the group most likely to approve of their contact with their member of Congress was those arranging a visit to Washington, DC. This is probably the least contentious reason for a member of Congress to

have contact with a constituent. The constituent is not expressing a position that the member may have a disagreement with, nor is the constituent making contact due to a problem with the federal bureaucracy. It is a relatively low-cost means for members to virtually guarantee a positive result. The group least likely to be happy with their contact is those contacting in order to express a position. Particularly during this era, members of Congress could have very well been overwhelmed with constituents making contact, leaving them unable to adequately communicate their positions in such a way that they could explain their decision-making process. Congressional staff do report that they believe the growth of electronic communications has, for better or worse, made them more accountable to their constituents (Goldschmidt, 2011). Fenno (1978) argued that members of Congress can often work their way around disagreements with constituents by explaining their actions. If members are overwhelmed with a deluge of e-mail and phone calls, with an already overburdened staff, their ability to solidify their base through communications with their constituents is somewhat limited.

Reason for Contact	% Satisfied	% Not Satisfied
Express Position	65.05	34.64
Request Help	68.50	31.50
Arrange Visit to DC	83.79	16.21

Table 2.16: Satisfaction Rates, by Reason for Contact

Table 2.17 provides data from the 2008 CCES Panel Study about the rates of satisfaction among constituents by means of contact. Those using fax and postal

Means of Contact	%Satisfied	%Not Satisfied
Phone	65.76	34.24
E-Mail	64.61	34.90
Postal Mail	50.35	49.65
Fax	49.37	50.63
In Person	77.90	22.10

Table 2.17: Satisfaction Rates by Means of Contact

mail were the least satisfied; they were also among the least-used means of contact. Less than 6% of respondents reported using faxes as a means of contact, with less than 12% indicating that they had sent postal mail. After the anthrax scares of 2001, many Congressional offices actively discouraged postal mail, indicating that the process of inspecting mail was leading to delays in mail receipt, leading to potential dissatisfaction with this form of contact. Those using phone and e-mail were roughly comparable in their level of satisfaction. Those making contact with their member of Congress in-person were the most satisfied, which is understandable, given the ability of a member to more directly address any concerns when presented one-on-one or in a public forum. As indicated earlier, this also the most useful method for persuading a member of Congress who is undecided on an issue, according to many Congressional staff (Goldschmidt, 2011)

2.8 Discussion and Conclusions

More people are contacting their member of Congress today than at virtually any time in the past. This, in many ways, simply reflects the increases in communication

across the board, as people grow more connected through different methods. Access to these forms of communication has not always been useful to members of Congress; these contacts provide a useful tool for better understanding how citizens relate to their government.

In addition, there is evidence that approval is at some level information-based, with the more interested and educated less likely to approve of the job their member of Congress is doing. This is somewhat surprising, but the more aware may have more opportunities to see and evaluate misdeeds by their members of Congress, or be more expectant of policy congruence with their member of Congress.

This work has broader implications for how we think about approval of members of Congress. The bulk of how people evaluate their members of Congress is likely driven by the policy preferences and partisanship of both parties. However, at the margins, it appears that members of Congress can gain some advantage through non-political means. The role of a better-informed electorate may not be wholly positive. As more people learn more about politics, the possibility of diminishing returns is a real one. More information could certainly lead to higher levels of cynicism, but for now, it would appear that candidates have a lot to gain by publicizing their names, party identification, and non-policy activities.

There is certainly more work to be done, particularly in unpacking the importance of contact in congressional politics. If so many people are in contact with their members of Congress, is it possible for contact to stay a plus for members of Congress? How do congressional offices handle the volume of requests they receive? In addition, assessing the impact of measures of mail sent via the franking privilege and partic-

ularized project expenditures in the context of how these behaviors are perceived is another step to be taken in order to more fully understand how the dynamic of this relationship works The importance of these nonpolitical concerns in the policymaking process is also a question yet to be answered. At the very least, this indicates that a more robust picture of voters' attitudes about representation can emerge when this data is integrated with other information about policy-based assessments of members of Congress.

Chapter 3

Communication with Congress and Member Job Approval

3.1 Negotiating the Representative-Constituent Relationship

If members of Congress truly are, as we have long thought them to be, "single-minded seekers of re-election," it stands to reason that virtually every action they undertake is designed to pursue this end (Mayhew, 1974). From the decisions that members of Congress make when voting on bills to how they choose to staff their offices, how they emphasize constituent services, and the committee memberships they seek, the desire to remain in office is at the heart of virtually everything that a member of Congress does. While members of Congress certainly have ancillary goals, such as advancing within the chamber and producing good public policy, the fact remains

that at the end of the day, a member must be in office in order to pursue those goals, and so re-election remains an essential component of the member of Congress' agenda (Fenno, 1973). Members of Congress want to be liked, or if not liked, then under the radar enough to have voters pull the lever for them while thinking, "Better the devil you know." With the vast majority of members of Congress getting re-elected every two years, despite recent declines in re-election rates, it would appear that members of Congress, if nothing else, are very good at getting elected to Congress. They either are able to persuade people to like them enough to vote for them or can take advantage of incumbency and convince voters to take the stand of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" and simply return them to office.

While re-election is certainly essential to achieving any other goals a member of Congress might have, the relationship between a member of Congress and his or her constituents does not conclude after the last ballot is cast. In the era of high-speed travel, members do not simply move to Washington, D.C., and ignore their districts. This relationship is further integrated as members of Congress can be held to account through a myriad of electronic means, including phones, e-mail, Twitter, and Facebook. Citizens can now have a higher expectation for contact and responsiveness from their representative in Congress.

There are certainly constituents in every district who serve as thorns in the sides of their representatives, who are in constant contact with that office regardless of what party currently holds the seat. Some of these individuals are motivated by a particular issue; others are simply standard-issue political gadflies. At the end of the day, however, the vast majority of constituents generally want a representative

who will do what they want them to do and will put their needs first, whatever they may be—grants, votes on issues, advocacy for the needs of the constituency with the federal bureaucracy. These constituents are likely not fully aware of every action taken by their member of Congress, and members of Congress certainly bear some culpability in this. Depending on the composition of their district and any potential electoral challenges, members of Congress also don't necessarily advertise actions that could color them as partisans. Instead of highlighting their partisan bona fides, many members of Congress tend to highlight achievements such as securing grants for local institutions, advertising staff office hours and available casework assistance, highlighting the achievements of local students, and other activities that are unlikely to anger any significant portion of one's constituency.

Most theories have held that for a member of Congress, to be known is to be liked, and that there is very rarely a downside to encouraging contact with one's district, no matter the form. As the structure and election frequency of the House of Representatives were designed by the Founders to maintain a close connection between representatives and their constituents, members could be seen to be fulfilling the intent of the Founders by maintaining a close relationship with their constituents and using all forms of communication available to them.

One challenge in expanding our understanding of these relationships is that much of the seminal research on Congressional representation at the personal level took place in the 1970s and 1980s (Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978; Fiorina, 1981; Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987). And in general, much of this research was based on small-N observer research or larger-scale surveys that are still unlikely to capture the full range

of political involvement. This research is tremendously important for developing a context for future research, but it does suffer from discrepancies between the context in this era and the current universe of congressional communication. Furthermore, when much of this research was conducted, the cost to a constituent of getting in touch with his or her member of Congress was quite high. The constituent had to identify the member of Congress, find out his or her address and/or phone number, write a letter or make a phone call during business hours, and maybe get a response at some point in the future. With fewer contacts, and those coming from individuals with a true investment in the issue or reason for that contact, staffers likely were able to take more time and effort with each individual request. Across the board, this research has found that in most situations, to be known is to be liked. The value of individual contact with one's constituents has often been seen as an essential component of succeeding at the ballot box and in Congress. However, the days of having to work to find one's member of Congress have ended, as that information is now at the fingertips of every American citizen. Again, the modern move towards more accessibility through communications technology has not yet been adequately studied.

3.2 The Modern Communications Environment

As explained in the previous essay, the vast majority of contact with Congress occurs over e-mail, and the frequency of contact with members of Congress has increased significantly over the last thirty-plus years. This certainly makes contacting one's member of Congress less costly; many people send and receive dozens of e-mails

in the course of a day, with little attention paid to many of them. Many interest groups have made an effort to minimize this cost even further, providing their members with telephone scripts and copy-and-paste e-mails, as well as simple directions for making contact with Congressional offices. This has led to an attendant explosion in electronic contact with members of Congress, though staff budgets to handle this increase in traffic have not increased accordingly (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). Staffers in many offices report a nearly exponential increase in the volume of contact experienced by their offices, making it hard to give each constituent the attention he may believe he is entitled to, particularly given the effective cuts in staff budgets since the 1980s. This marks a clear difference between modern research and the research performed in the 1970s and 1980s. However, most offices do claim that managing and responding to constituent correspondence is a high priority for their office (Fitch, Goldschmidt and Cooper, 2011). Whether they are truly able to prioritize constituent communications with the burdens on staff members and the volume of contact is an open question.

Indeed, electronic traffic to Congress has crashed the House mail servers on a number of occasions, leading to restrictions on the use of the "Write your Representative" systems during the exact times when more citizens would be getting in touch with their representatives, such as during debates about the Troubled Asset Relief Program and debates over instituting health care reform (Yager, 2008). While these systems are designed to serve as a facilitator of involvement with Congress, as well as a tool for congressional offices to sort and prioritize communications, having them shut down during the very times citizens may find them useful is not likely to endear

members of Congress to their constituents. It could reinforce perceptions of public officials as elitists who are cut off from those they represent.

Even more traditional systems of contact with members of Congress, such as town hall meetings and office phone lines, have come under fire. During times of controversy, there have been several instances of full voice mailboxes for members of Congress, or of 'Press 1 for yes' type voicemail menus to quickly record sentiments with a minimum of staff engagement. This may provide a tool for constituents to express their preferences, but not for members to respond to them in a fashion that constituents will find acceptable.

Given this level of scrutiny and the resources available to members of Congress, is it truly possible for members of Congress to keep all of their constituents happy? Probably not.

3.3 Congressional Job Approval

Congress has almost never been the most popular part of the U.S. government, and its popularity has declined over time. Some argue that it is simply a case of familiarity breeding contempt. Members of Congress are often in relatively close contact with their constituents, their behavior is broadcast nearly constantly via C-SPAN; and members of Congress are fixtures on the Sunday morning talk-show circuit and on 24-hour cable news outlets. In other words, citizens are more able to see how the proverbial sausage is made when it comes to Congress than the President or the Supreme Court (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). However, there has traditionally

been a paradox at work: While the institution of Congress, or the collective body of lawmakers, may receive a low approval rating, constituents have generally been happy to rate their own members of Congress quite highly. Members of Congress have often leveraged this by running "against Congress" when running for office (Fenno, 1978). In recent years, many members of Congress have attempted to leverage social media and the Internet as tools to control their messages to constituents and foster a relationship with those they represent; these tools also have the benefit of circumventing certain House rules about constituent communications and franking.

	2007	2008
Member of Congress		
Approve	33.76	41.32
Disapprove	27.39	26.51
Don't Know/Neither	38.85	32.17
N	9,833	32,536
Congress		
Approve	14.74	19.59
Disapprove	65.46	71.18
Don't Know/Neither	20.70	9.22
N	6,610	32,566

Table 3.1: Approval of Member and Approval of Congress, 2007-2008

Recent studies indicate that this insulation that members have enjoyed may be losing its potency. As Table 3.1 shows, even when Congress is not the most popular institution, individual members of Congress are somewhat well liked. In 2007, the first session after the 2006 change in party control of the House, approval of Congress as an institution hit 14.74%, while 33.76 % of respondents indicated that they ap-

proved of the job their individual member of Congress was doing. An even larger proportion indicated that they were unsure or had no opinion, which possibly reflects the number of respondents who had new members of Congress after the 2006 election. In 2008, the traditional level of approval of members of Congress was in place, with over 40% of respondents indicating that they approve of the job performance of their own member of Congress.

With regard to job approval of Congress as a whole, the movement in 2008 indicated that more respondents had a clear opinion of the institution. The rate of approval went up, to almost twenty percent, while disapproval also increased to over 70%. At the same time, the rate of "don't know" respondents also dropped to less than 10%. This represents a marked departure from the approval numbers previous studies, which had much larger proportions of respondents indicating that they had no opinion or a neutral opinion about their representatives and Congress as a whole. This could be a function of increased news media coverage as a result of the 2008 elections.

Approval of one's member of Congress is highly influenced by shared partisanship. Co-partisans are more likely to approve of their member of Congress than those who do not share a party label with their representative. In all likelihood, this reflects shared priorities and preferences.

As table3.2 shows, in 2007, a small majority of those sharing partisanship with their member of Congress, over 53%, indicated that they approved of the job their member of Congress was doing. The measure of partisanship presented here is based

	2007	2008
Same party		
Approve	53.12	76.38
Disapprove	18.98	12.68
Don't Know/Neither	27.90	10.94
N	5,979	12,744
Different party		
Approve	23.58	22.95
Disapprove	31.81	33.75
Don't Know/Neither	44.60	43.30
N	3,854	19,792

Table 3.2: Approval of Member by Shared Partisanship, 2007-2008

on collapsing those who identify as independents but who lean toward one party or the other into their respective partisan identifications. However, a much larger proportion indicated that they had no opinion or were not sure as to whether or not they approved of the job their member of Congress was doing, with over 27% indicating as such, and just under 19% reporting disapproval. Again, this could reflect the fact that there were many new members of Congress who took office in 2007. In 2008, the divide between co-partisans and non-co-partisans was clear. The vast majority, over three-quarters, of respondents who shared a party label with their member of Congress approved of the job their member was doing in Washington. Even smaller proportions, 12.68% and 10.94% respectively, either disapproved or had no opinion with regard to the job performance of their representative. These are clearly the ideal numbers for a member of Congress.

For those not sharing partisanship with their representative in Congress, the results are decidedly more mixed. In 2007, less than a quarter of non-co-partisans

indicated that they approved of their member of Congress, and over thirty precent indicated disapproval. However, the largest share of respondents fell into the category of "don't know" or neutral, which could bode well for a member of Congress who is able to appeal across party lines. The 2008 sample indicates that members of Congress may hold the advantage indicated in 2007, which is that those of a different partisan persuasion than their representatives are more likely to have no opinion or have a neutral opinion of their member of Congress than to approve or disapprove of their job approval. Approval for those without the benefit of party congruence was around 23% in 2008, hardly the proportions members of Congress dream of. It is conceivable, however, that a member of Congress could use the benefits of office in the form of casework and advertising to advertise non-partisan actions to those who do not have an opinion. If a member of Congress is able to reach a constituent who does not register an opinion through a positive casework contact, for example, it is possible that the member could tip the balance in their favor when the constituent goes to the polls on Election Day, riding the benefits of incumbency toward re-election.

3.4 Contact and Approval

Contacting one's member of Congress is not an experience that is identical for everyone. Different offices have different procedures, and members may emphasize different types of contacts. Some member websites, for example, encourage constituents to communicate via e-mail, while other members strategies emphasize in-person contacts at town halls or meet-and-greet events. Offices can also vary from day to day,

meaning that constituents may not always have a satisfactory experience when getting in touch with their representatives. Maybe they catch a staff member on a bad day or the citizen's request cannot be fulfilled for some reason. Constituents may also be misinformed about what members of Congress have responsibility for, contacting Congress with a question better suited for a state or local official, or expecting Congress to have more direct control over the bureaucracy than they do in reality. Constituents may also have extremely satisfactory experiences with contacting their member of Congress, and these experiences may be able to outweigh policy differences through emphasizing a sense of trust between member and constituent. Members have an opportunity to help their districts and earn their constituents' approval through good constituent services, and some scholars have suggested that these services can be central to a strong electoral position, though this is disputed (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; McAdams and Johannes, 1988).

Approval of one's member of Congress is developed on a number of dimensions. Overall, approval of one's member of Congress has traditionally been relatively high, particularly compared to approval of Congress as an institution or other branches of the federal government, as indicated by Table 3.1. The strongest predictor of this approval is traditionally partisanship, an unsurprising result. Constituents are likely to approve of members of Congress of their own party and perhaps be less approving of members of Congress with whom they do not share a party label.

The underlying truth is that most people are satisfied with contact. Though the rate of constituent contact with Congress has increased over time, as the previous essay indicates well over half of those who contact their member of Congress come

away satisfied with that contact. Members of Congress would not do well to neglect the reality that a strong constituent services operation is an important component of running a congressional office. However, with this increase in contact, members now have more opportunities to both succeed and fail. These successes or failures can impact how constituents perceive and approve of their member of Congress. Rather than simply looking at whether contact in and of itself translates into approval, the varying nature of these contacts makes it reasonable to examine the relationship between approval and contact as a function of how satisfied constituents are with the results of their communication with Congress.

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 present the results of an ordered logit estimator predicting the probability of member job approval. The model controls for contact satisfaction, party congruence, age, gender, racial congruence, race (white/nonwhite), education, attention to and interest in politics, party identification, representative's party, and ideological extremity. Member job approval was recoded from a 5-point scale to a 3-point (-1, 0, 1) variable. Tables 3.5 and 3.6 present first differences generated using CLARIFY(Tomz, Wittenberg and King, 2003). The baseline that the first differences are calculated from is a Republican white male between the ages of 45 and 54 who has some college education, is of the same race, gender, and party as his member of Congress, has moderate interest in political affairs and identifies as a moderate ideologically and believes his member of Congress is a Republican.

Examining the 2007 first differences, moving from no contact to some form of contact has a nearly equal effect on the probability of approval in opposite directions,

	β	SE	z	P> |z|
Contact Satisfaction	1.015	.035	29.06	0.000
Party Congruence	1.126	.022	5.89	0.000
Age	.0213	.015	1.41	0.160
Gender	-.022	.044	-0.49	0.622
Racial Congruence	.124	.049	2.56	0.011
Race(white/nonwhite)	-.110	.055	-2.02	0.044
Education	.0342	.015	2.31	0.021
Political Interest/Attention	-.010	.035	-.030	0.765
Ideological Extremity	-.086	.030	-2.86	0.004
3-point Party ID	-.124	.022	-3.82	0.000
Perceived Member Party	.127	.022	5.89	0.000
N	8568			
Pseudo R^2	.0915			
Log-likelihood	-8508.4702			

Table 3.3: Ordered Logit Estimates of Member Approval, 2007

	β	SE	z	P> |z|
Contact Satisfaction	1.712	.030	57.46	0.00
Party Congruence	2.338	.034	68,73	0.000
Age	.036	.008	4.45	0.000
Gender	-.174	.025	-6.90	0.000
Racial Congruence	.154	.030	5.13	.0.000
Race(white/nonwhite)	-.132	.031	-4.16	0.000
Education	.022	.009	-2.44	0.014
Political Interest/Attention	-.046	.020	-2.26	0.024
Ideological Extremity	-.089	.018	-5.05	0.000
3-point Party ID	-.142	.018	7.84	0.000
Perceived Member Party	.207	.009	23.30	0.000
N	29042			
Pseudo R^2	.2006			
Log-likelihood	-24834.327			

Table 3.4: Ordered Logit Estimates of Member Approval, 2008

	Δ	SE	Lower 95%CI	Upper 95% CI
High School Diploma→ 4-Year Degree	.025	.010	.005	.47
No Contact → Bad Contact	-.229	.008	-.245	-.214
No Contact→ Good Contact	.237	.008	.223	.252
Different Party→ Same Party	.249	.012	.226	.273
Low interest→ High interest	-.006	.016	-.038	.027
Moderate Ideology→Strong Ideology	-.042	.015	-.071	-.014
Baseline Probability of Approval	.481	.017	.448	.511

Table 3.5: First Differences: Probability of Approval, 2007

	Δ	SE	Lower 95%CI	Upper 95% CI
High School Diploma→ 4-Year Degree	-.014	.006	-.025	.0003
No Contact → Bad Contact	-.404	.006	-.415	-.392
No Contact→ Good Contact	.225	.007	.213	.239
Different Party→ Same Party	.517	.007	.504	.530
Low interest → High interest	-.018	.008	-.034	-.001
Moderate Ideology→Strong Ideology	-.038	.008	-.054	-.024
Baseline Probability of Approval	.705	.009	.686	.721

Table 3.6: First Differences: Probability of Approval, 2008

with a bad contact leading to an approximately 23 percentage point drop in the probability of congressional job approval, and a good contact leading to a 24 percentage point increase in the probability of congressional job approval. With a baseline probability of approval just under 50 percent, this type of contact could have a large impact on whether an individual approves of their member of Congress and would therefore support him or her in a subsequent election. The only other characteristic that shows a similar effect is party congruence, unsurprisingly. Moving from different parties to the same party would indicate a 25 percentage point increase in the probability of job approval; however, members of Congress cannot guarantee co-partisanship with every

resident in their district, while they theoretically have some control over the quality of experiences that their constituents might have in interacting with their offices.

The 2008 data show a similar pattern to that of the 2007 data, with one notable exception. Moving from no contact to a poor contact has a massive effect on the probability of job approval for the member of Congress, a 40 percentage point drop. Moving from no contact to a positive contact only has about a 23 percentage point effect. Additionally, the effect of co-partisanship in the 2008 data is very large, with moving from different parties to the same party carrying a 51 percentage point difference, demonstrating the overwhelming effect that partisanship has with regard to job approval. This flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that members ought to make themselves available to their constituents as much as possible in order to engage in high-quality retail politics; contact is not always the useful advertising activity that we may think it is. Rather, contact can function in less helpful ways and can have a detrimental effect on the probability of member job approval. Looking at the 2008 data, the potential detrimental effect of a bad contact could be seen as encouragement for members to limit their services or contacts to maximize the probability of high-quality contact that will leave constituents satisfied.

Job approval is unsurprisingly dominated by party congruence. However, the other characteristics have some surprising effects. Another source of a large effect on the probability of approval comes in the form of interest in politics. Those who are very interested in politics are about 12% less likely to approve of their member of Congress than those with low interest in politics. This may be related to theories that argue that Congress, as the most public branch of the government, is also the branch

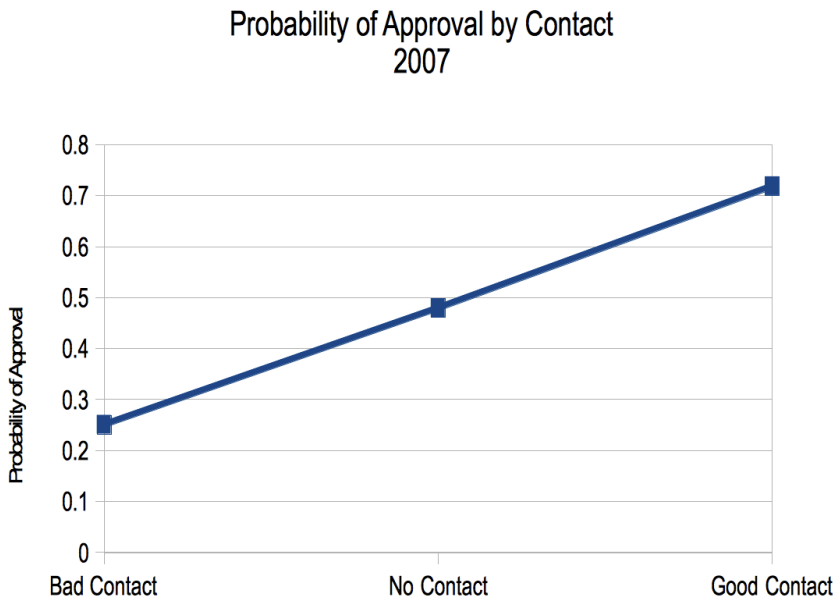

Figure 3.1: Effect of Contact Satisfaction on Approval, 2007

that citizens trust the least (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). Likewise, higher levels of education and strong ideologies—characteristics often thought to be useful to the maintenance of a strong civic culture—also lead to lower probabilities of approval for members of Congress.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 present the effects of contact on the probability of member job approval in 2007 and 2008, respectively. As is visible from the graph, the baseline probability of approval of one's member of Congress for someone who has not contacted their member of Congress is just under .5 in 2007 and about .7 in 2008. For those who have had good contacts, the probability of approval is over .7 in 2007

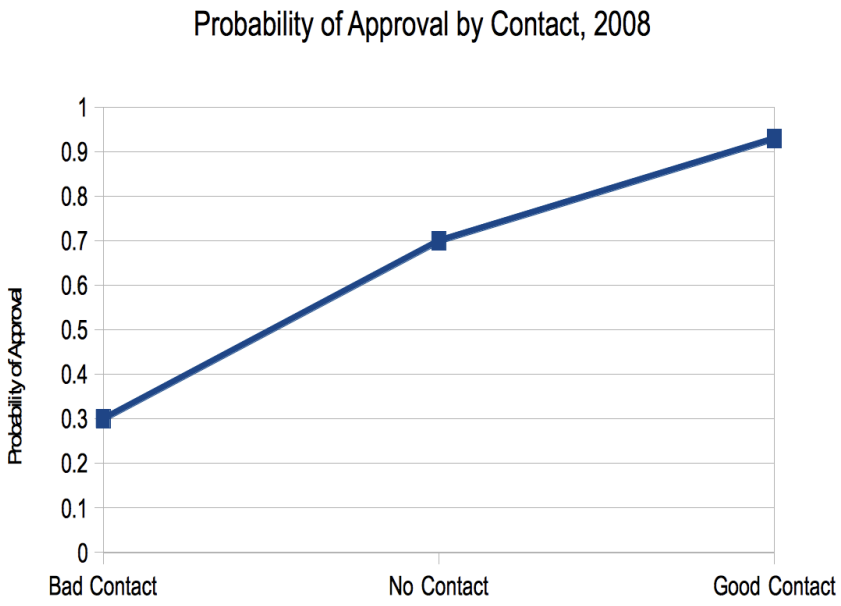

Figure 3.2: Effect of Contact Satisfaction on Approval, 2008

and approximately .9 in 2008. Bad contacts drive that probability to less than .3 in the 2007 data and approximately .3 in the 2008 data. 4. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 present a demonstration of the power of contact's effect on approval in relation to partisanship. Party congruence is the best predictor of member job approval and is a difficult hurdle to overcome. However, as these figures show, the probability of approval for a co-partisan with an unsatisfactory contact is actually lower than that for a non-co-partisan who had a satisfactory contact with their member of Congress. This could bode well for the value of constituent services in politically heterogeneous districts.

3.5 Discussion and Conclusions

Members of Congress are always trying to put their best foot forward. The permanent campaign is very real and is composed of both their activities in office and all of the perks that officeholding carries, as well as their campaign-specific activities such as fundraising. The fact that good contacts with one's constituents can increase the probability of job approval comes as no surprise. However, the power of these contacts in relation to something as durable as political partisanship does bear some consideration. Partisanship is a relatively fixed identity in most cases and forms a perceptual lens through which people evaluate information and assess political actions and figures. Those things that fit within the framework of that perceptual lens are more likely to be accepted and approved of, while those that are outside those barriers are less likely to make it through to incorporation in an individual's political

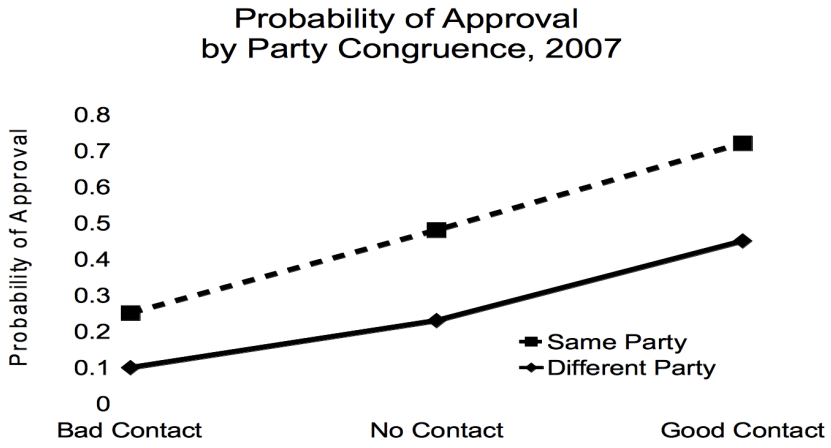

Figure 3.3: Contact And Approval by Party, 2007

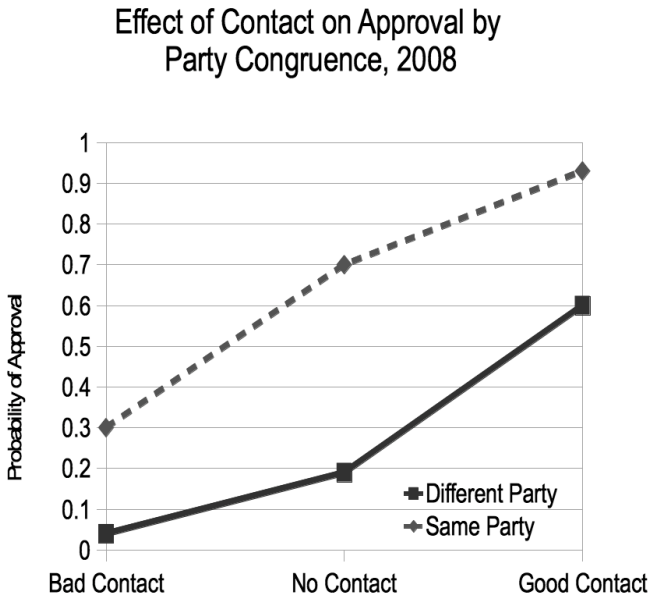

Figure 3.4: Contact And Approval by Party, 2008

worldview.

This helps us understand how the effect of contact can interact with political partisanship so clearly. Receptivity is a clear element in developing understanding, and for a person to contact a member of Congress or any other political figure would indicate a certain amount of receptivity—they have asked for the information or the help, after all. A satisfactory response in this case would certainly be helpful in terms of bridging the gap between members of Congress and their constituents, particularly when crossing party lines. Given the nature of primary challenges in the modern context, particularly on the right, it may also be necessary to shore up one's bona fides outside of roll call votes in order to stave off challenges due to partisan or ideological

purity tests.

Members of Congress are certainly granted significant resources in order to manage their jobs as representatives of the people. Office space in Washington and the district, staff salaries, communications budgets, relationships with the media and party officials, and funds to travel frequently to the district are all advantages granted to members of Congress, and they are central to making sure that the member is able to present him- or herself to their constituency effectively. However, members are short on one key resource: time. As campaigns grow more and more expensive, members of Congress are obligated to spend an increasing proportion of their time both in Washington and in the district raising funds for themselves as well as their party and other members of Congress. Some evidence indicates that members are cognizant of the increased demands placed on them by their constituents, with a distinct trend toward keeping a larger staff in one's district rather than in Washington (Ornstein, Mann and Malbin, 2008).

Members of Congress are also now subjected to their constituents having more access to them simply by virtue of modern technological tools. Members of Congress have noted the increased rancor of constituents, and being accessible to constituents can come with a certain level of risk to one's person, as the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords demonstrated in 2011. While many members leaving public office have cited the increasing dysfunction within Congress as a reason behind their departure, others have indicated that the demands and perceptions of their constituents have also played a role, making it difficult both to serve as a representative and to legislate effectively (Allen, 2012; Grim and Siddiqui, 2013).

As individual member resources are reoriented toward the nature of the permanent campaign, the role and importance of staff in the day-to-day workings of Congress increases. However, despite the increasing volume of communications with Congress, staff levels have declined since 1979 and pay has also remained flat. Staff are also underpaid relative to comparable positions in the DC metro area, and staff turnover is relatively high; a study of staff turnover between 2009 and 2011 placed the retention rate over a two-year period at under 65% (Dumain, 2012). Heavy workloads and demanding constituencies aside, many congressional staff take jobs as lobbyists, leveraging their connections and expertise about Congress. However, it is unlikely that a lobbying firm would reward expertise in managing constituent communications. If staffers want to seek employment in the private sector, they are probably more likely to develop skills and contacts to facilitate such a transition rather than emphasizing constituent responsiveness. Though more members of Congress are stationing staff in district offices, staff incentives will remain an important component in understanding congressional responses to their constituents.

Chapter 4

Using the Franking Privilege: An Exploration

4.1 Introduction

Every member of Congress has to figure out a way to keep in touch with her constituents. For some, this means being a member of the "Tuesday-Thursday Club," spending as much time as possible at home in their districts. Other members of Congress set up elaborate district operations with experienced caseworkers to help constituents navigate the federal bureaucracy. In recent years, members of Congress have turned to higher-tech tools, including websites, Twitter, and "Tele-TownHalls." The dramatic results of the "Congress on Your Corner" and town hall events held by many members of Congress in the summer and fall of 2009 in order to facilitate discussion of the health care legislation under consideration were a clear demonstration that many constituents want more contact with their member of Congress, sometimes

to the detriment of the member's public perception. Some members of Congress are able to cultivate fruitful relationships with the media, though this presents problems of its own.

At the end of the day, though, members of Congress must find efficient means of communication that allow direct contact with as many constituents as possible, at the lowest cost to the member in terms of time, energy, and finances, and this is where the franking privilege comes into play. The franking privilege is a central perquisite of holding office in the United States. In essence, it allows the signature of a member of Congress to substitute for first-class postage on official mail sent to constituents. Eligible mail includes responses to constituent inquiries, general newsletters, notices about events, and government documents (Glassman, 2007). Members also use the franking privilege to solicit constituent feedback via district surveys with tear-off postcards. House members are issued a Member's Representational Allowance, calculated based on the number of addresses in the member's district, as well as estimated staff and office expenses. Subject to this financial constraint and laws and regulations governing franked mail, members are not otherwise limited as to the total amount they may spend on franked mail, including mass mailings.

Franked mail is divided into two classes, which are subject to different regulations.[1] Mailings consisting of fewer than 500 pieces are not subject to inspection by the Franking Commission. However, any mailing consisting of more than 500 substantially similar pieces, regardless of whether they are mailed at once or over time, must be submitted to the Franking Commission to determine whether they are in com-

[1]While the franking privilege is more extensive than the mass mailing privilege, I will use the terms "franking" and "mass mailings" interchangeably in this analysis.

pliance with regulations governing mass mailings. No member may use the franking privilege to send campaign materials or other items not in the public interest, such as holiday greetings, and members of the House may not send unsolicited mass mailings outside their district. House members are not allowed to send unsolicited mass mailings less than 90 days prior to any primary or general election in which they are a candidate. In addition to the signature of the member (in place of a stamp) on the mailing, each mass mailing must include the statement, "This mailing was prepared and mailed at taxpayer expense." In FY2006, House franked mail costs were $30.7 million. A 1981 report indicated that the average American received approximately two pieces of mail per year from Congress (Robinson, 1981). This represents a large decrease over the last twenty years, as the House has instituted stricter spending limits and public disclosure of mailing costs (Glassman, 2007).

While it is clear that citizens are happy to share their views in great volume with members of Congress, their representatives also hold some responsibility for communicating the results of those views back to the district. Survey data has indicated that what constituents want most from their representatives is to be kept informed about what is going on in Washington (Michigan, 2002). However, while we assume that members of Congress take as much from this well of institutional advantage as they can, we know little about how this varies among members of Congress. Not all members of Congress maximize their use of these perquisites, and some send no mass mailings at all. Who makes the most use of it, and can this be predicted by member or constituent charactaristics? This study is a step toward developing a new understanding of the mechanisms of representation.

The franking privilege, and mass mailings in particular, have many advantages for the member. Many members now outsource the production and mailing of large-scale newsletters, for example, cutting down on the amount of staff time dedicated to the preparation of these mailings. Newsletters allow members to communicate directly with their constituents without a media filter. Members have complete control of the contents of the newsletter and are able to accentuate the positive, highlighting legislation and achievements in accordance with what will get the best results for the member in the district. It makes sense then, that members would attempt to maximize their use of this tool; yet there is a great deal of variation within the Congressional membership as to the use of the frank.

This analysis is designed primarily as an exploration of the patterns of use of the mass mailing privilege in Congress. The study examines mailing behavior in the House as a whole, patterns among minority members of Congress and districts with varying racial makeups, relationships between mailing patterns, seniority, and vote share, and a brief examination of characteristics of the group of members of Congress who sent no mass mailings in 2007 or 2008.

4.2 Prior Research

Prior research on the franking privilege is scant, and somewhat outdated. Most research on the franking privilege and resource allocation in general occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, and more recent research covers only up through the year 2000 (Parker and Goodman, 2009). This creates a gap in our understanding of how members of Congress use this privilege, as the regulations have changed dramatically in the

last 30 years, as has the set of resources available to members of Congress. The Member's Representational Allowance was originally divided into separate accounts, while it is now given as a lump sum that members may use in any way they choose. This can provide a useful examination of how members choose to allocate their resources and explain their Washington behavior, a crucial component of how we understand the home styles of members of Congress (Fenno, 1978).

Most studies of the incumbency advantage have come to the conclusion that incumbency provides an advantage of somewhere around 8%, and this advantage has grown since the 1940s. Prior research has focused on explaining that there is in fact an incumbency advantage, as well as some of the consequences of this advantage (Gelman and King, 1990; King and Gelman, 1991; Levitt and Wolfram, 1997). Other work has focused on the sources of the incumbency advantage: name recognition, congressional casework, or use of the benefits of office and the creation of a "personal vote" (Johannes and McAdams, 1981; Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Romero, 2006). The findings with regard to how members of Congress can secure re-election through the provision of constituency service, or casework (e.g. credit claiming) indicate that citizens do respond positively to services provided by members of Congress, though these findings are somewhat disputed (Fiorina, 1981; Johannes and McAdams, 1981; Serra and Cover, 1992; Serra and Moon, 1994). Evidence from state legislatures indicates that higher legislative operating budgets tend to increase the incumbency advantage (King, 1991). Survey evidence from Congressional offices does little to explain the characteristics of members who engage in a high level of constituency service (Johannes, 1983).

As far as advertising is concerned, experimental evidence indicates that mailings without policy content can have a brief impact on levels of name recognition in a member's district (Cover, 1985, 1980). While this work has found effects for performing casework and developing a "personal vote," little work has been done about how members of Congress actually go about claiming the incumbency advantage—who pursues this advantage and in what ways—has been done, particularly in the modern Congress and particularly since the post-1995 changes in overall congressional resource allocation. Some research does argue that short-term electoral factors do not drive a large proportion of the member's calculus in resource allocation (Bond, 1985). Likewise, the literature often depends on self-reports from member offices or aggregated data. Those members in districts with characteristics that favor the member, regardless of what representational activities the member may engage in, may not need to do much with the frank to have an incumbency advantage. Likewise, members in districts with some divisions, or districts that may be hostile to the member in some way, may need to come out with guns blazing in communicating with the district.

Congruence with one's district may also play a role. Members of Congress who are racial minorities and who represent districts with large minority populations may use this privilege as a means to solidify their relationship with their constituents. This may also help explain results about trust in government with regard to representation by minorities in Congress (Mansbridge, 1999; Gay, 2002): These representatives are working harder to achieve buy-in from citizens from traditionally less-active groups. Likewise, those who are of a different race than a large proportion of their con-

stituents may use the privilege more in order to overcome those divides, particularly in districts where the representative is of a racial minority, but represents a non-majority-minority district.

4.3 Data

The data presented here are drawn from the Statement of Disbursements of the House, which is published quarterly by the Clerk of the House of Representatives. Each quarter produces three volumes of data on the detailed expenditures for each member of Congress, though there are no consistent reporting mechanisms. In the third volume of each quarterly statement, the Clerk also publishes a summary of members' mass communication behavior. For 2007 and 2008, the data comes from the hard copies of the statement. The assembled data from 2007 and 2008 includes the number of pieces of mass mail sent, the average number of mailings per household address, the total postage cost of these mailings, and the average postage cost per household address. These figures include mailings sent only via traditional postal means, and do not include any mailings or communications not sent in this format, such as e-mail newsletters(Clerk of the House, 2007, 2008).[2]

The data are arranged by member, and each entry includes additional information

[2]The Committee on House Administration bean publishing PDFs of the Statement of Disbursements of the House starting with the third quarter of 2009. Additionally, beginning with the 2009 legislative year, the information presented on mass communications changed from being focused solely on traditional postal mail and expanded to include all mass communication of 500 substantially similar pieces, regardless of form. This means that e-mail newsletters and scripts for telephone town halls, which are popular among members of Congress, are now counted as part of members' mass mailing reports.

about the member and his or her district. The data compiled on each district includes characteristics such as the district's urbanicity and rural composition, the district's racial makeup, the percentage of the district population living below the poverty line, the percent of the population over the age of 65, the district's median income and the total population in the district. The data were drawn from the American FactFinder 110th Congressional District Summary File as made available by the Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, N.d.). Additionally, for each member, the dataset includes characteristics such as member gender, race, partisanship, and their vote share in 2006 (Koszczuk and Angle, 2007). These data were used to create a set of indicator variables for having freshman status, being a "zero mailer," representing a majority minority district, and racial congruence for a majority minority district (e.g., an African American member of Congress representing a majority African American district). The data excludes members who did not serve a full calendar year as well as non-voting delegates to Congress from Washington D.C. and other territories.

4.4 The Use of the Frank: The House as a Whole

Table 4.1 presents basic summary statistics about the use of the mass mailing privilege for 2007 and 2008. Overall, the members in this dataset sent over 95 million pieces of mail in 2007 and over 100 million pieces of mail in 2008. Even in an era where one might think that traditional mailings may not be as useful, it is clear that many members of Congress still lean very heavily on this tool. The average proportion of the Member's Representational Allowance (MRA) devoted towards postage

	2007	2008
Total Pieces Sent	96,269,202	101,393,010
Average Per Member	224,404	236,900
Total Postage Cost	$19,811,473.73	$24,828,790.87
Average Postal Cost Per Member	$46,180.59	$58,011.19
Average % of MRA	3.41	4.17
Number of Zero Mailers	75	82
Average Pieces per Person	.347	.366

Table 4.1: Mass Mailings: Summary Statistics

costs is between 3%-4.5%, with some members spending over 20% of their MRA on franked mail in 2008.

A number of findings here fit in with the conventional wisdom about the use of such privileges; notably, there is a substantial uptick in all of the indictors from 2007 to 2008. This, of course, fits in with our understanding of how members behave in election years. The increase in 2008 is even more surprising, given that members are generally barred from sending unsolicited mass mail for 90 days prior to an election, either primary or general, meaning that many members of Congress were sending little mail during the final quarter of 2008. One surprising item is the increase in the number of members not making use of the mass mailing privilege, from 75 to 82. This may happen as some members discover that they will not face a challenge and therefore opt to dial back their use of the privilege, while other members increase the volume of their use of mass mailings as a tool to advertise their actions as an incumbent member of Congress.

Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 provide data on the biggest mailers in the Congress,

	Name	District	Party	Pieces
2007				
	Brown, H	SC01	R	1,258,547
	Obey	WI07	D	995,962
	Stark	CA13	D	940,615
	Pastor	AZ04	D	931,661
	Sensenbrenner	WI05	R	849,651
2008				
	Brown, H	FL03	D	1,338,982
	Broun	GA10	R	1,255,141
	Dreier	CA26	R	1,036,688
	Bachmann	MN06	R	1,025,383
	Kuhl	NY29	R	1,025,383

Table 4.2: Top 5 Mailers by Total Pieces

	Name	District	Party	Total Postage Cost
2007				
	Brown, H	SC01	R	$208,144.32
	Obey	WI07	D	135,914.34
	Stark	CA13	D	227,305.66
	Pastor	AZ04	D	185,935.10
	Sensenbrenner	WI05	R	134,482.62
2008				
	Culberson	TX07	R	$308,881.18
	Brown, H	SC01	D	296,729.77
	Kuhl	NY29	R	282,847.84
	Dreier	CA26	R	278,249.87
	Murphy, T	PA18	R	250,157.54

Table 4.3: Top 5 Mailers by Total Postage Cost

ranked by total pieces of mail, total postage spending, and percentage of MRA spent on franked mail postage for mass mailings. In 2007, only one member of Congress, Henry Brown of the South Carolina 1st, sent over 1 million pieces of mail, with the

	Name	District	Party	% of MRA
2007				
	Giffords	AZ08	D	16.80
	Stark	CA13	D	16.06
	Donnelly	IN02	D	15.99
	Brown, H	SC01	R	14.91
	Burton	IN05	R	13.94
2008				
	Culberson	TX07	R	21.55
	Kuhl	NY29	R	21.11
	Brown, H	SC01	D	20.70
	Dreier	CA26	R	19.03
	Murphy, T	PA18	R	17.59

Table 4.4: Top 5 Mailers by % of MRA

rest of the top 5 closer to 900,000. In 2008, all of the members in the top 5 sent out over 1 million pieces of mail. Again, this hews closely to how we understand the mechanisms of the frank; its use increases in election years. Given the populations in these districts, this works out to about one newsletter per household for the first three quarters of the year. Interestingly, the top 5 were not consistent from year to year, both in terms of individual members and in terms of partisanship. The partisan breakdowns are interesting as well; in 2007 all of the categories were dominated by Democrats, while the balance shifted toward Republicans in 2008. In all likelihood, these shifts represent the member taking into account changing conditions on the ground in their district into account, as well as the development of a legislative record to announce back in the district.

The top 5 mailers in 2007 in each of the categories did not demonstrate much with regard to a relationship between high relative use of the frank and electoral vul-

nerability; the 2006 vote shares generally averaged in the range of 60%, which many would consider a comfortable margin, with a high share of 74%. This may give us a clue to the chicken-and-egg nature of thinking about the frank and electoral success: These may be the results of a long-term use of the frank, as the average number of terms in office for the 5 members sending the most mail in 2007 is more than 13. However, the relationship between total spending and share of MRA appears to be more closely tied to tenure; those demonstrate lower seniority on the average.

In 2008, the average 2006 vote share of the top 5 mailers increased substantially; averaging over 65%, with several members unopposed in 2006 showing up in the top 5 for all three categories. This may indicate a more anticipatory use of the frank rather than one responding to the prior signal of the most recent election. The member unopposed in 2006 may find herself with a challenger two years later; the frank may be a signal of how seriously the member takes this challenge.

4.5 Franking and Partisanship

The frank is beloved on both sides of the aisle, as demonstrated in Table 4.5. In a non-election year, mass mailings go out at about even rates for both Democrats and Republicans, with the GOP holding a slight edge. In 2008, both parties increased their use of the frank, but the average Republican use of the frank increased much more than the Democrats, with Republicans spending, on average, over $17,000 more per member on mass mailings than in 2007. This could match up with increased challenges in vulnerable GOP districts and a more robust dialogue as the national

campaign ramps up, or members of the minority party may simply feel the need to do more explaining of their actions in Congress or present themselves in a different light. Members in the minority party may have a greater need to articulate a coherent partisan narrative with regard to a legislative agenda as they return home to campaign, and so the franking privilege may play a larger role for minority party members' ability to explain their Washington work to their constituents.

	Democrats	Republicans
2007		
Average Pieces	220,779	228,092
Average Postage Cost	$45,647.59	$46,686.20
Average % of MRA	3.41	3.46
Zero Mailers	38	34
2008		
Average Pieces	215,772	260,097
Average Postage Cost	$52,641.46	$63,907.37
Average % of MRA	3.78	4.61
Zero Mailers	41	41

Table 4.5: Summary Statistics by Party

4.6 Franking and Demographics

An ongoing debate in the political science literature rests in the examination of descriptive representation. An initial examination of how different demographic groups approach the frank could give us insight into how members of Congress choose to engage with their constituents.

2007	White	Black	Hispanic
Average Pieces	229,884	130,339	253,904
Average Postage Cost	$48,053.25	$21,129.14	$49,101.83
Average % of MRA	3.58	1.56	3.59
Zero Mailers	58	15	2
2008			
Average Pieces	241,451	140,192	230,721
Average Postage Cost	$59,548.43	$27,716.83	$66,542.05
Average % of MRA	4.28	1.97	4.75
Zero Mailers	68	13	1

Table 4.6: Summary Statistics by Member Race/Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity provide some surprising items and some clear variation. Most noticeable is the much lower rate of usage appearing among Black members of Congress, and the somewhat higher rate of usage of mass mailings among Hispanic-identified members of Congress. Given this, some of the theories about descriptive representation (Mansbridge, 1999; Gay, 2002) may need more elaboration. If being represented by someone of your own race if you are a member of a racial or ethnic minority increases your rate of participation in government or communication with one's representatives, what is the mechanism of action? Mass mailings are certainly a crude measure of this, but this provides some direction as to how we might examine variation in allocation of resources by members of Congress.

Table 4.6 presents summary statistics on use of mass mailings by member race or ethnicity. It is clear from this table that White and Hispanic members of Congress lean much more heavily on the mass mailing privilege than Black members of Congress. On average, in both 2007 and 2008, both White and Hispanic members of Congress sent over two hundred thousand pieces of mail under the mass mailing heading, with

an average postage cost of just under $50,000 in 2007 and over $50,000 in 2008. This uptick likely represents an expected increase in the use of the frank with the shift from a non-election year to an election year. Notably, among White members of Congress, the number of zero mailers increased from fifty-eight to sixty-eight from 2007 to 2008. This could potentially reflect a lack of challenger in the 2008 election, lessening the need for a member of Congress to emphasize his or her record against an opponent. Contrasting with White and Hispanic members of Congress, Black members of Congress appear to be far less reliant on the mass mailing privilege. The average Black member of Congress sent fewer than 150,000 pieces of mail in both 2007 and 2008. They tended to spend less than 2% of their MRA on mass mailings in both 2007 and 2008. This could, in fact, reflect the fact that many Black members of Congress represent very safe Democratic, majority minority districts and therefore can re-orient their spending to staff or office space as they have a strong sense of trust with their constituencies, and perhaps they do not feel the imperative to use this particular representational tool.

Table 4.7 examines the mass mailings sent to districts with particular demographic characteristics. Majority Black districts received fewer than 100,000 pieces of mass mail in 2007, on average, though the number of pieces of mail sent to majority Black districts more than doubled in 2008. This in all likelihood reflects shifting electoral landscapes as members realize that they have a challenger or that the political climate of their district has somehow changed. Districts with a population that is majority Hispanic did not display the same degree of change between the election year and the non-election year. In 2007, majority Hispanic districts saw just under 200,000 pieces

of mass mailings on average. In 2008, that increased to just over 260,000 pieces on average. The proportion of the Member's Representational Allowance spent on mass mailings in 2007 was just under 3%, a proportion which increased only minimally, to just under 5% in 2008. It would appear that the representational styles of members of Congress representing Hispanic districts did not change appreciably between 2007 and 2008.

The relationship may not be driven by race or ethnicity; rather, this may simply be a function of the average tenure in office of Black and Hispanic members of Congress. The average Black member of Congress in this study has been in office for over 6 terms, with a range from freshman to 22 terms; the average Hispanic member of Congress has also been in office for approximately 6 terms; however, the range is much more compressed, with the longest tenure in the data at 13 terms.

In addition to the race of the member of Congress, it is also important to look at the demographics of the districts being served, and the racial or ethnic congruence of the majority with their member of Congress.

One longstanding reason for the creation of majority-minority districts is the ability of a population to elect a candidate of their choice, presumably of the same race of the majority of the residents of the district. Virtually all districts that are majority-minority do elect representatives from the demographic group in the majority of the district. Table 4.8 examines the mailing behaviors in majority Black districts, broken down by whether the member of Congress elected by that district is African American or not. In the 110th Congress, there was a single majority-black district

2007	Majority Black Districts	Majority Hispanic Districts
Average Pieces	79,547	194,571
Average Postage Cost	$14,430.33	$38,427.30
Average % of MRA	1.08	2.80
Zero Mailers	16	9
2008		
Average Pieces	160,198	262,875
Average Postage Cost	$35,316.62	$64,002.35
Average % of MRA	2.63	4.62
Zero Mailers	8	2

Table 4.7: Mailing Activity, Majority Black and Majority Hispanic Districts

2007	Majority Black District, Black Representative	Majority Black District, Non-Black Representative
Average Pieces	79,449	386,595
Average Postage Cost	$13,089.58	$91,163.98
Average % of MRA	0.97	7.02
Zero Mailers	11	0
2008		
Average Pieces	88,129	655,717
Average Postage Cost	$20,414.22	$175,610.80
Average % of MRA	1.48	13.15
Zero Mailers	8	0

Table 4.8: Mailing Activity, Majority Black Districts by Race of Representative

represented by a non-white representative, Democrat Steve Cohen (TN-9).The table shows that the behavior of Black and non-Black representatives of majority Black districts varies only in election years. In 2007, majority Black districts received an average of just over 79,000 pieces of franked mail. Black representatives of majority Black districts used an average of less than 1% of their MRA on mass mailings, and eleven Black members of Congress representing majority Black districts sent no mass

2007	Majority Hispanic District, Hispanic Representative	Majority Hispanic District, Non-Hispanic Representative
Average Pieces	257,437	123,339
Average Postage Cost	$51,634.19	$23459.48
Average % of MRA	3.78	1.69
Zero Mailers	2	7
2008		
Average Pieces	235,874	304603
Average Postage Cost	$67,077.37	$59,250.06
Average % of MRA	4.80	4.34
Zero Mailers	1	1

Table 4.9: Mailing Activity, Majority Hispanic District by Ethnicity of Representative

mailings whatsoever. Cohen, the only non-Black representative of a majority Black district, sent more than 300,000 pieces of franked mail to his district, spending more than $90,000, or just over 7% of his Members' Representational allowance.

The behavior of Black members of Congress representing majority Black districts did not change appreciably between 2007 and 2008. The number of pieces of mail sent on average to a majority Black district with a Black representative increased by fewer than ten thousand pieces, on average, and the proportion of the MRA steered toward mass mailings went up by about a half a percentage point. This behavior was remarkably different in the case of Black majority districts represented by non-Black members of Congress. In 2008, Cohen, who had dealt with a challenging election to Congress in 2006, significantly increased his spending on franked mail. This is, in all likelihood, one of the clearest electoral effects that we could see in this case. Cohen sent more than 650,000 pieces of mass mailings, spending over $175,000, or 13.15 percent of his members' representational allowance. This is even more remarkable because much of that mailing must be condensed into the first half of the year given

the nature of House regulations on the use of the frank in the times surrounding elections.

Table 4.9 examines the mailing activities in districts that are majority Hispanic, broken out by the ethnicity of the member of Congress. In this case, a somewhat different trend is visible than that in the case of Black majority districts. The average Hispanic member of Congress with a Hispanic majority district sends more mail than the average non-White representative for a majority Hispanic constituency. In 2007, this led to an average of just over 250,000 pieces of mail sent by Hispanic members of Congress to majority Hispanic districts. The case of non-Hispanic members of Congress and their majority Hispanic constituencies is similar to that of non-African American members of Congress who represent majority African American districts. In 2007, the average member of Congress in this type of district sent just over 120,000 pieces of mass mailings to their district. In 2008, this average more than doubled, to an average of over 300,000 pieces of mail and an average spend of almost $60,000. Only one member of Congress for this type of district sent no mail whatsoever. This may feed into differential needs for members' presentation of self (Fenno, 1978), particularly in more populated districts or districts with difficult-to-reach populations, such as Hispanic populations where English may not be the primary language or there is a large immigrant or non-citizen population that may not be civically involved or is not eligible to participate in politics. Members of Congress many focus less of their energy on constituents who do not vote or cannot vote. Hispanic members of Congress who are racially congruent with the majority of their constituents may have less of an incentive to use this type of communication, as they may be able to put

more effort into face-to-face forms of communication.

Additionally, there are members who represent plurality White, majority-minority districts. These districts are particularly concentrated in California, where districts may have large Asian, Hispanic, and Black populations as well as a significant white population. In many cases, these members may be performing individual outreach to leaders of these groups with mailings that are sub-500 pieces, which prevents us from drawing significant conclusions about the overall behavior patterns of these representatives.

4.7 Electoral Factors

Classical examinations of the use of the frank (Lipinski, 2004; Cover, 1985) denote a clear relationship between one's electoral position and one's use of the franking privilege, particularly mass mailings. While regulations are in place that could conceivably cut back on this, the relationships still hold.

Table 4.10 presents results of a univariate OLS regression of 2006 vote share on mass mailing behavior in 2007 and 2008. The relationship varies clearly between the two, with the 2006 election having a clear negative relationship to the member's 2006 vote share and a limited negative relationship between vote share and mailing behavior in 2008. In all likelihood, this reflects reactions to the 2006 election; a candidate elected from a marginal district may want to shore up his or her new district quickly and solidify that relationship. Additionally, there was a change in

2007	β	SE	t	t> |z|
2006 Vote Share	-4471.481	756.330	-5.91	0.000
Constant	525140.8	51890.18	10.12	0.000
N	430			
R^2	0.0733			
2008	β	SE	t	t> |z|
2006 Vote Share	-3196.024	821.5363	-3.89	0.000
Constant	446832.6	56166.66	7.96	0.000
N	422			
R^2	0.0348			

Table 4.10: Univariate OLS Regression Estimates of Mass Mailing Behavior, 2007 and 2008

party control in 2007; this relationship could also reflect new members of Congress from more marginal districts boosting their name recognition in their new positions. The explanatory power of the variable also decreases between 2007 and 2008; while this relationship explains about 7% of the variation in 2007, it explains just about 3.5% of the variation in 2008.

It also makes sense to evaluate this relationship while controlling for other potential factors such as district and member demographics. Tables 4.11 and 4.12 present this data for 2007 and 2008, respectively.

Tables 4.11 and 4.12 present the results of a multivariate regression of the total pieces of mail sent by members of Congress, controlling for 2006 vote share, member tenure, district percent urban, district percent Black, district median income in 1999, district percentage in poverty, and the percentage of senior citizens in the district. The model also includes indicator variables for majority Black and Hispanic districts represented by Black and Hispanic members of Congress, whether the district qual-

Variable	β	SE	t	t> |z|
2006 Vote Share	-2456.562	1127.304	-2.18	0.030
Terms in Office	-2583.396	2678.171	-0.96	0.335
% Urban	1271.294	698.143	1.02	0.069
% Black	352.266	1181.188	0.30	0.766
1999 Median Income	0.6278	2.043	0.31	0.759
% in Poverty	-3895.803	4041.037	-0.96	0.336
% over 65	1376.341	3799.083	0.36	0.717
Member Party	8067.314	24113.91	0.33	0.738
Majority Black Dist. with Black Rep	-82795.44	66683.25	-1.24	0.215
Majority Hispanic Dist. with Hispanic Rep	94903.63	61328.58	1.55	0.123
Marginal District	9285.865	30001.4	0.31	0.757
Freshman	152135.2	39126.68	3.89	0.000
Constant	280931.3	153182.9	1.83	0.067
N	411			
R^2	0.1750			

Table 4.11: Multivariate OLS regression estimates of mass mailing behavior, 2007

Variable	β	SE	t	t> |z|
2006 Vote Share	933.134	1120.847	0.83	0.406
Terms in Office	-5194.721	2824.496	-1.84	0.067
% Urban	1434.852	733.118	1.96	0.051
% Black	442.750	1250.307	0.35	0.723
%1999 Median Income	2.387	2.149	1.11	0.267
% in Poverty	-2158.179	4242.621	-0.51	0.611
Member Party	-64846.55	25016.51	-2.59	0.010
% over 65	4767.267	3999.45	1.19	0.234
Majority Black Dist. with Black Rep	-129021.7	72330.33	-1.78	0.075
Majority Hispanic Dist. with Hispanic Rep	81460.39	64053.25	1.27	0.204
Marginal District	48654.28	36655.29	1.33	0.185
Freshman	189124.8	41175.68	4.59	0.000
Constant	-45763.76	158031.7	-0.29	0.772
N	403			
R^2	0.1899			

Table 4.12: Multivariate OLS Regression Estimates of Mass Mailing Behavior, 2008

ifies as marginal, and whether the member is in his or her first term, as well as the member's partisanship.

Table 4.11 indicates that members' mailing behavior does respond to the election results in the prior election. There is a clear and significant negative relationship between member vote share and the amount of mailings that a member of Congress sends; as the member's share of the vote increases, for each point increase, the number of mailings drops by over 2,000. Even controlling for district demographics and member characteristics, this relationship stays strong. The only other characteristic that approaches the explanatory power of vote share in 2006 is freshman status, which is likely related to the share of the vote. First term members of Congress are generally more vulnerable and are less well known in their districts, and they must put a great deal of time and energy into shoring up their bona fides back home. This analysis demonstrates that electoral success and time in the chamber both play a role in explaining how members allocate their resources.

The 2008 results, presented in table 4.12, show a slightly different story. Member and district characteristics play a much larger role in explaining the variation in members' use of the frank, rather than a clear relationship to prior electoral achievements. The relationship between vote share and member mailing behavior changes in both sign and significance, with a positive relationship between vote share and mailing behavior, but the relationship is much weaker. Rather, time in office, distract urbanicity and demographics, and freshman status are much more powerful in explaining who is using the frank to communicate with constituents. Members who have been in office longer send over 5,000 fewer pieces of mail for each term in office.

Another factor in less usage of the frank is member party; Democrats are less likely to send mail than Republicans:Tthis could indicate members' perceptions of electoral vulnerability in the context of the 2008 election season. Freshman status continued to display a strong positive relationship to the use of the frank, with members in their first term continuing to make a much heavier use of the frank than those with more tenure in office.

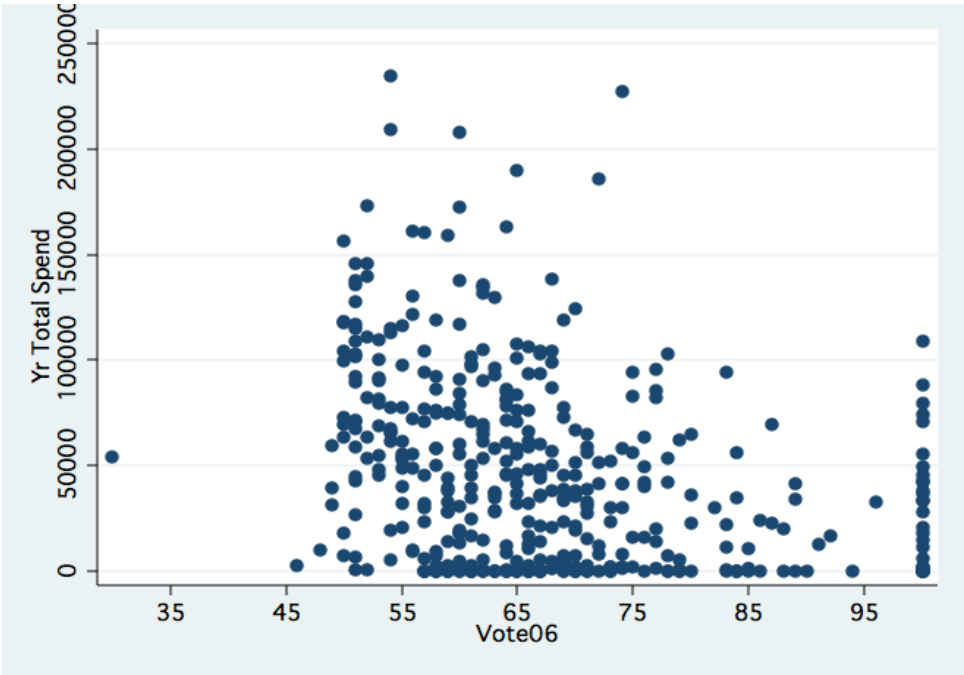

Figure 4.1: Spending vs 2006 Vote Share, 2007

Examining total spending on postage plotted against the member's 2006 vote share, or their most recent signal of their electoral strength, there are some noticeable idiosyncrasies, as is visible in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. One item of note is the high level of variation in the use of mass mailings by members who were unopposed in 2006. While

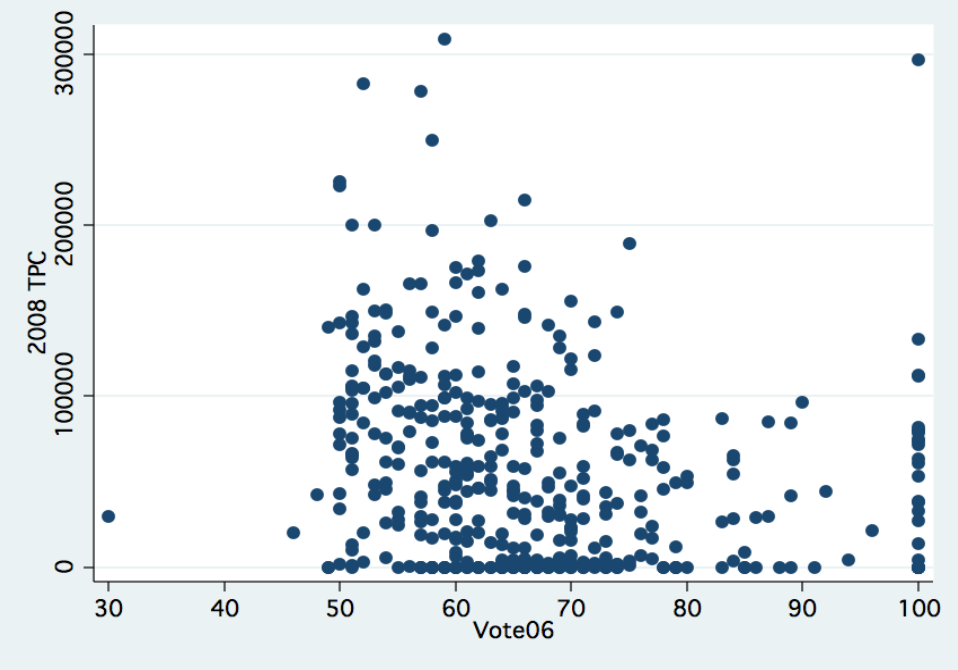

Figure 4.2: Spending vs 2006 Vote Share, 2008

there is certainly endogeneity to be taken into account when examining how members of Congress respond to the various factors in their district, it is interesting that there isn't a clearer relationship. Some things are as expected: the set of members sending the highest number of mailings is heavily weighted toward those receiving smaller vote shares; the spending on the frank decreases somewhat as the 2006 vote share increases. The relationship is certainly not one-to-one, but it does make sense. One interesting item to note is where the zero mailers show up along the spectrum. In 2007, there are very few zero mailers with vote shares under 55 percent. In 2008, the zero mailers are somewhat more present in that region. Future research could include whether the member had an announced challenger in the 2008 race, which may explain some of the changes from 2007 to 2008.

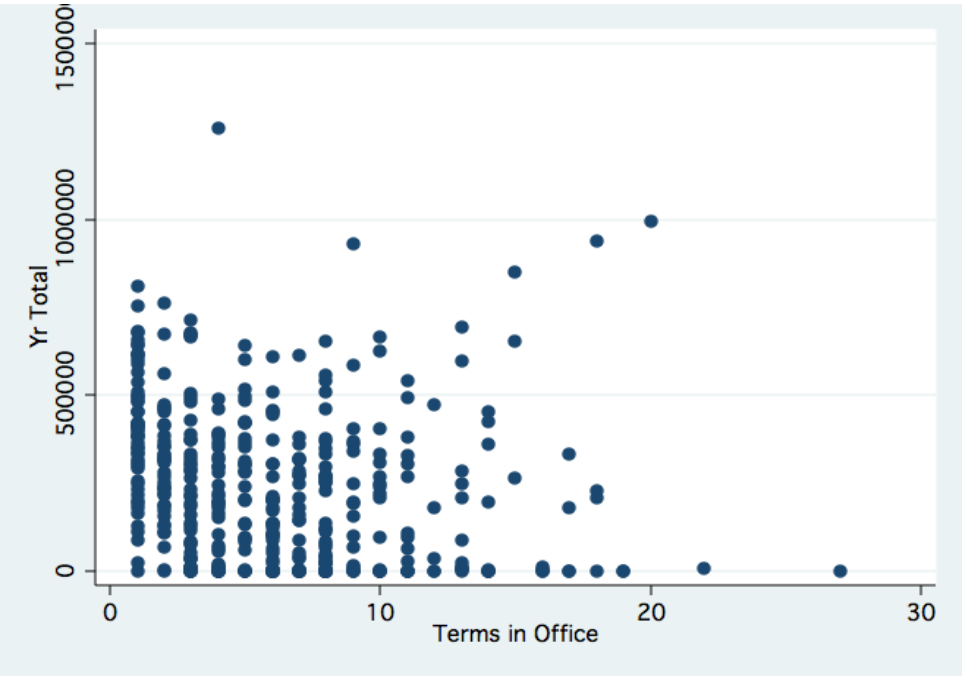

Figure 4.3: Total Mail Pieces Sent vs. Terms in Office, 2007

The examination of seniority and the use of the frank presents some interesting questions. The first is in the realm of examining the cohort effects of entry into Congress, and the second is derived from questions of expansionist vs. protectionist career phases.

It is conceivable that many new members of Congress enter the chamber with large e-mail lists and a somewhat sophisticated online communications operation (Burden, 2007). In a sense, this could lead to a drop in the number of pieces of mail sent by members in their first few terms, as they lean on their prior resources. However, this does not appear to be the case. In 2008, at least, every member in the first term sent out some sort of mass mailing. This may be a function of the expansionist phase of the members' careers, indicating that they are looking to bolster their re-election

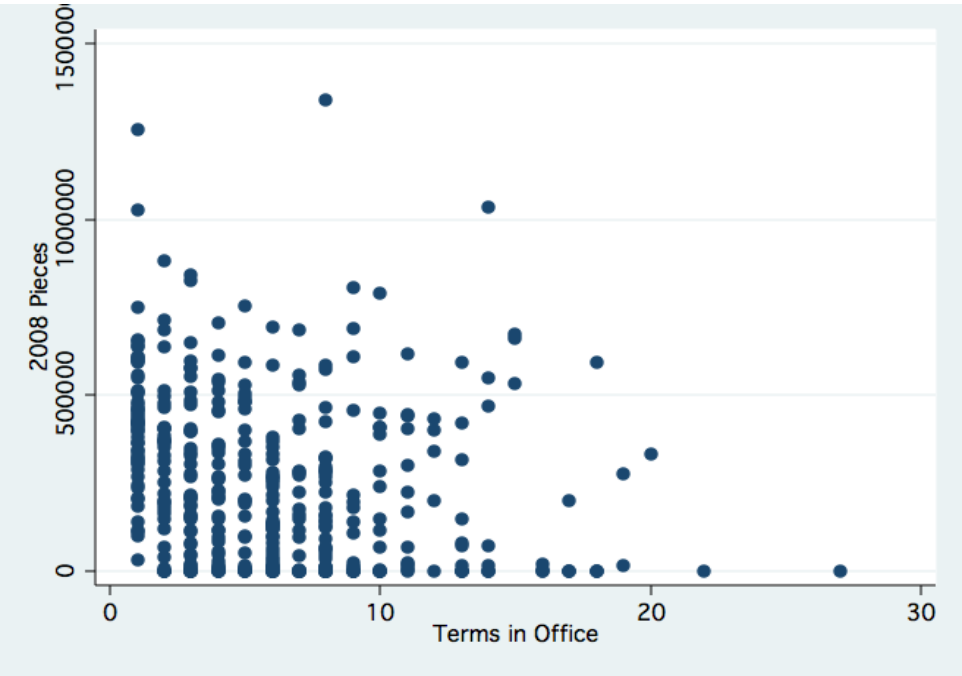

Figure 4.4: Total Mail Pieces Sent vs. Terms in Office, 2008

coalition, while they may see less need to do so in the first year of their term (Fenno, 1978)

While one might think of those holding office for a long time as set in their ways, it appears that they don't spend much money on the franking privilege, as can be seen in Figures 4.3 and 4.4. They may be relatively confident in their incumbency advantage, secure in their perception at home, with a larger proportion of their budget spent on district offices, higher staff salaries given the likely seniority of their staff, and travel back to the district, though recent studies note that more senior members tend to focus their energies on legislative productivity (Parker and Goodman, 2009).

4.8 No Newsletters? A Brief Examination of "Zero Mailers"

A common consideration in examining the behavior of members of Congress is that members are single-minded seekers of re-election, and they are resource maximizers (Mayhew, 1974). Given this, and the fact that the frank is one of the best-known assets of officeholders, a sizeable proportion of the house opts to send no mailings under the mass mailing privilege. This indicates that they have no occasion to send 500 or more pieces of substantially similar mail, a somewhat surprising concept given that the average district population is over 300,000.

As the MRA is zero-sum, there is no "use it or lose it" imperative specific to any component of the allowance. A dollar not spent on franked mail is an additional dollar to be spent on staff or travel, though the hiring and salary rates for congressional staff are somewhat circumscribed. A member cannot, for example, put forth the entirety of his or her allowance to employing thirty staffers; members are limited to 22 staff total, both full and part-time. Other than that, however, members are free to do as they wish. So why opt out of an extremely convenient means of contacting large populations? Future research could examine the overall spending patterns of these members in greater detail; but for now, an examination of the demographic characteristics of these members is in order.

Seventy-five members of Congress in 2007 sent no mass mailings, and in 2008 that number went up to 82. The overall makeup of this population reflects, in large part, the demographics of the Congress as a whole: mostly white, and mostly male. The

2007 population of zero mailers was generally sent to office by large margins in 2006, averaging 73% of the vote, with a range from 57% to 100% (unopposed). They were generally longer-tenured members, averaging over 8 terms in the House, and from largely urban areas, perhaps where members can more efficiently use district offices or media to reach out to their constituents. The 2008 zero mailers largely reflect the same characteristics; however, the range of 2006 vote shares increases slightly, with members receiving between 49% (in a multi-way election) and 100% of the vote in 2006 opting out of sending mass mailings.

There are several possible explanations for these members' behavior. The most nefarious is that these members are sending out mass mailings but failing to report them; this is unlikely, as members do have to account for their spending rates to the Committee on House Administration. Some of these members may be from farther-flung districts and may leap at the opportunity to spend more of their allowance on travel, rather than being restricted to a certain number of trips per year, as it was under the former system. There may also be a communications format substitution effect; members opting out of this tool may have large, sophisticated Internet operations, or take advantage of large well-managed e-mail lists. Nevertheless, the mere presence of this population warrants further study.

4.9 Conclusion

This analysis presents several key findings about the use of the franking privilege in the House of Representatives. While most members of Congress do opt to

communicate with their constituents on a broad basis with this resource, there is a significant minority that opt out entirely. Racially congruent representatives of majority-minority districts, both Black and Hispanic, are somewhat less likely to use the franking privilege, likely reflecting their overall general electoral security. Prior electoral results are somewhat predictive of future use of the frank, but initial results indicate that anticipation of future electoral challenges may be a more accurate predictor of whether a member opts to use the mass mailing privilege. Members early in their tenure in the House, particularly freshmen members, are particularly likely to take advantage of the mass mailing privilege, reflecting the requirements of the expansionist phase of a congressional career.

This is a preliminary investigation, and further data collection must be undertaken to more broadly understand the mechanisms governing the use of the franking privilege in this context, as well as some assessment of the content of these mailings. The variation by race of member and district racial composition provides some interesting new information about how the mechanisms of descriptive representation may operate in the modern context, with Black members of the House using the mass mailing privilege at a far lower rate than other members of the House, and members representing majority Black districts sending far fewer of these mailings regardless of the member's race, except in election years.

The franking privilege, and mass mailings in particular, is the subject of a great deal of scrutiny. Bills have been introduced in multiple Congresses that would ban members from mass mailings of congratulatory notices and newsletters and would disclose on the mailing the cost involved in producing and sending these items (Glass-

man, 2007). This legislation has rarely made it past committee, though members of both parties have filed legislation on this topic. With the greater availability of MRA and mass mailing data starting in 2009, it is possible that increased public awareness of this spending may lead to better prospects for this legislation and further changes to the current regulatory structure.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Members of Congress do not have an easy job. With the increasing demands placed on their time by fundraising, constituent services, legislation, the news media and political parties, they are required to manage their priorities in ways that their predecessors could not have imagined. How these representatives respond to these demands has clear consequences for our understanding of how democracy works in a practical sense.

It is clear that more constituents are getting in touch with their representatives. This is reasonable, given the twin factors of increased population growth and the ease of communications today. While much lower rates of communication were reported in studies through the 1990s than in the CCES, this can be attributed to the increased ease of communication made possible by advances in online technology. However, there is certainly more to be done in this area. Constituents now have more opportunities not only to communicate with their members of Congress through direct means, but also to express dissatisfaction publicly. For example, constituents could air their

grievances with their poor experiences with their representatives through channels such as Facebook or Twitter, which could then have a ripple effect through social networks. Future research could investigate whether those who contacted their representatives told any friends, colleagues, or family members about their experiences communicating with Congress, either positively or negatively.

Additionally, examining whether contacts are independently directed, solicited by members of Congress, or orchestrated by an interest group or other organization could provide more insight into how these contacts originate. Prior research has shown that political involvement is often developed through a recruitment process, which could help researchers better understand the factors that motivate communication (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Additionally, congressional staff question the veracity of the mass mailings orchestrated by interest groups; some policy proposals have encouraged offices to develop stronger indexing metrics by which congressional offices could track policy interest from the district (Fitch and Goldschmidt, 2005). Asking those who contact their members of Congress about how their communication originated could provide insight into how constituents view these communications–do they weight them heavily? Do they rely on scripts or talking points provided by an outside group? Such information would also inform a broader understanding of how political participation works today.

This research is also somewhat time-bound; an increase in communications via third-party services was not as much a part of the communications landscape at the time of these surveys. The vast majority of members of Congress do use third-party tools such as Twitter and Facebook, and these tools can serve as a means by which

members and their staff solicit communications from their constituents. However, these communications are not necessarily of the same depth as traditional communications methods. What does it mean, for example, if a constituent "Likes" a post by a member of Congress? Is that the same as forwarding an e-mail from an interest group? How do member offices manage these types of communications, particularly given that the ability of an office to determine whether or not such communications are originating from within the district? Members may relish the back-and-forth that such tools are able to create, and may also be able to use these tools to send trial balloons about potential policy ideas out into the ether. However, these tools, and their direct access to constituents, can provide opportunities for members of Congress to, for lack of a better term, make fools of themselves when mis-using the tools.

Additionally, generational replacement may affect how members of Congress choose to interact with their constituents. As those who have been raised on a steady diet of internet access from a young age become old enough to run for and hold office, they will naturally bring a different sensibility with regard to communications to their job. Now, securing one's name—and any potential variations—for a web domain, e-mail address, and Twitter handle is a necessary step to take if a person remotely considers a life in the public eye. As this generation moves into public office, the twin demands of communication and transparency may radically alter the way that representatives and constituents relate to one another. It may no longer be necessary for a constituent to go to the effort of seeking out staff through e-mail or the phone; some public officials now respond directly and quickly to requests made via Twitter, which is both shorter in form and highly public. While this tends to be used more at the

municipal level, as in the case of Newark, New Jersey mayor Cory Booker, if these individuals move into higher office they may take this sensibility with them. However, this sensibility could shift the expectations of constituents to an unreasonable and unsustainable level.

While the old maxim holds that "to be known is to be liked", members used to enjoy far more control over their own public image, as well as more distance through making their residence in the Washington area. Nowadays, with many members of Congress spending as little time in Washington as possible and maximizing days in their home districts, members are far more accessible. While at first glance this could be seen as a boon, giving members even more opportunities for voters to get to know them, it also opens up opportunities to let constituents down. As noted in Essay 2, poor contact satisfaction can even drop the probability of approval for co-partisans, which would seem to be virtually impossible, given what we know about congressional approval. However, there are now more opportunities to fail when engaging with constituents, and members would do well to manage expectations, train staff well, and use discretion in communications.

There is also the lack of geographic constriction inherent in the use of some of these electronic tools. Some members of Congress require those contacting them to provide address information, and reject communications from constituents not in the district. Others use a template that allows anyone to contact them, but may well engage some sort of filtration mechanism at the office level. At the very least, members must do much more to separate wheat from chaff. While there was never anything preventing non-constituents from initiating contact with members of Congress, the

effort involved in making a phone call or writing a letter provides a disincentive to do so, making it easier for members of Congress to negotiate the volume of mail they get. Members must now devote their limited resources to an additional level of triage; members want to avoid wasting resources on a non-voter, but at the same time, missing an important request or communication could have negative consequences later on. With some of the lower-cost tools, members could use these means to raise their own profile outside the district, managing their public image in anticipation of advancement to higher office or within the chamber or party. Members of Congress using these tools can simultaneously reach many more constituents, but also more individuals outside the district, for better or for worse.

After recent campaigns, many members of Congress come into office with strong digital operations and less dependency on television advertising and direct mail. In all likelihood, there are cohort and age effects to be examined, with more recent freshman classes displaying more digital savvy, with veteran lawmakers tending towards older mechanisms. Differential data reporting could be helpful in this area; starting with the third quarter of 2009, the Statements of Disbursements of the House began including e-mail newsletters, which are subject to regulation by the Franking Commission, in their mass mailing counts. This clearly gives a more accurate picture of the communications choices being made by members of Congress. However, thinking about this as a function of resource allocation becomes more difficult. The new data do not distinguish between electronic and paper newsletters , so any members combining print and digital newsletters would have the true allocation of their office resources somewhat more obscured.

From a policy point of view, members must negotiate a labyrinthine web of regulations that have not necessarily kept up with the times. The franking manual issued by the Committee on House Administration is 66 pages long, but has not been updated since 1998. It includes no information about electronic newsletters or third-party websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Until 2008, members of Congress were barred from posting information on sites other than the official House and Senate websites, though many members used services such as Twitter and YouTube prior to the issuance of regulations allowing this. As the communications environment continues to shift into even smaller spheres such as tablets and mobile phones, the way that constituents make contact with those who represent them will continue to evolve. The question is whether public policy and law makers will manage to keep up with these forthcoming changes.

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